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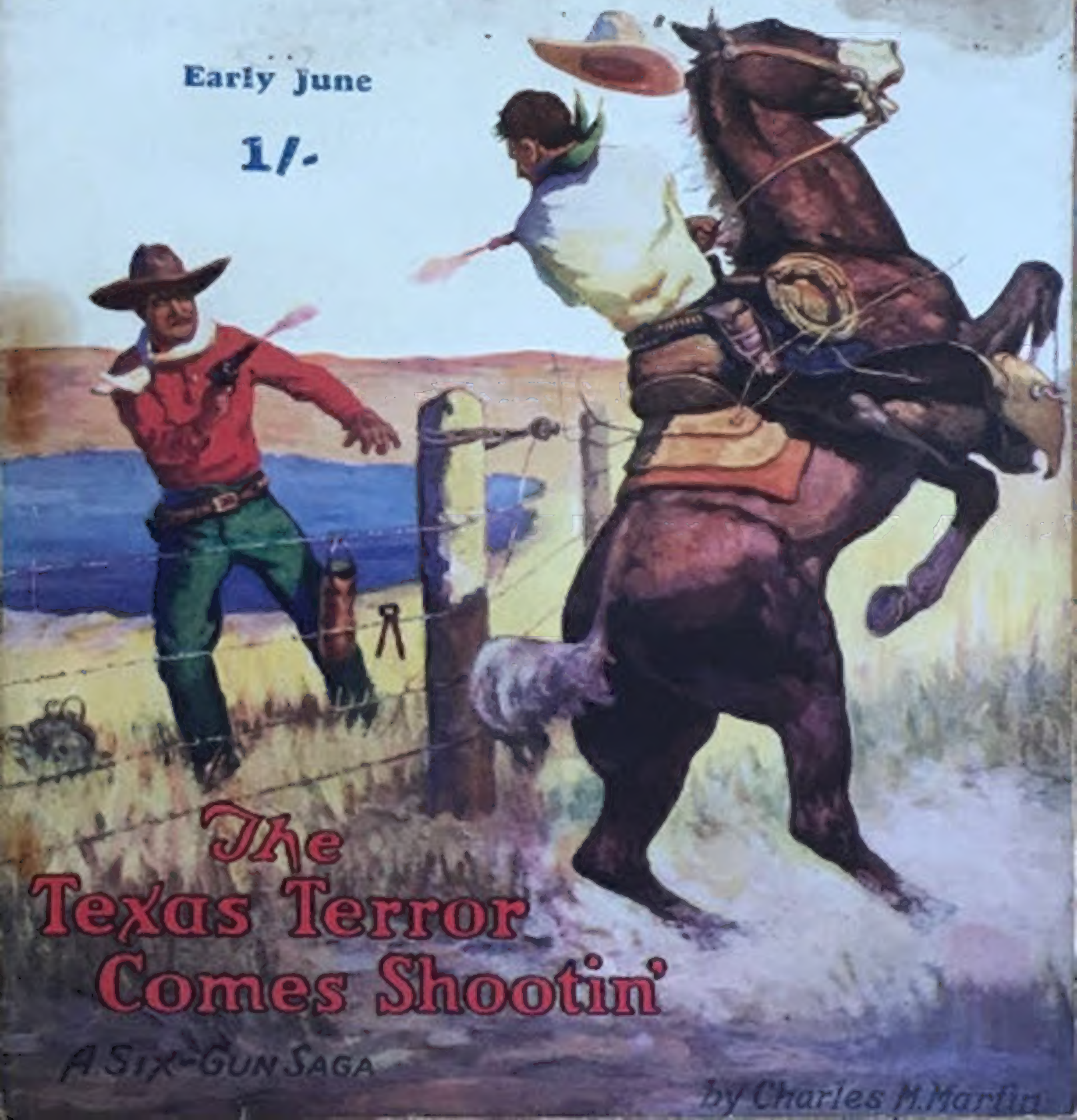

The Texas Terror Comes Shootin'

A Six-Gun Saga

by Charles M. Martin

EARLY JUNE, 1935 EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

WEST

Every Other Friday One Shilling

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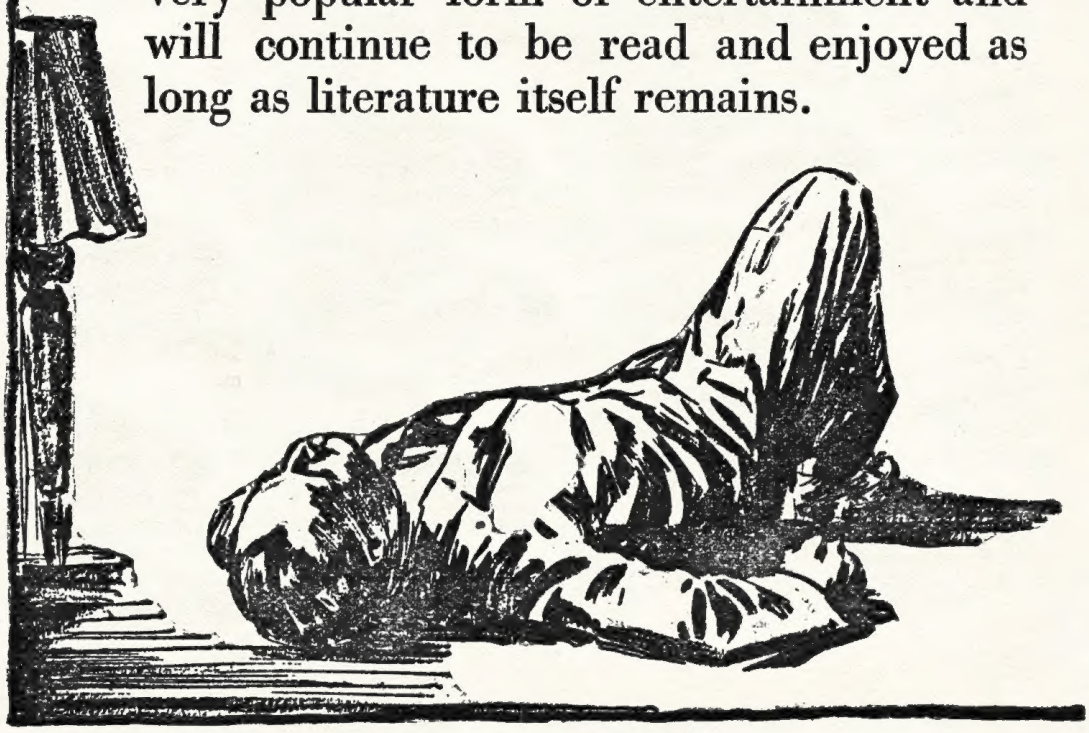

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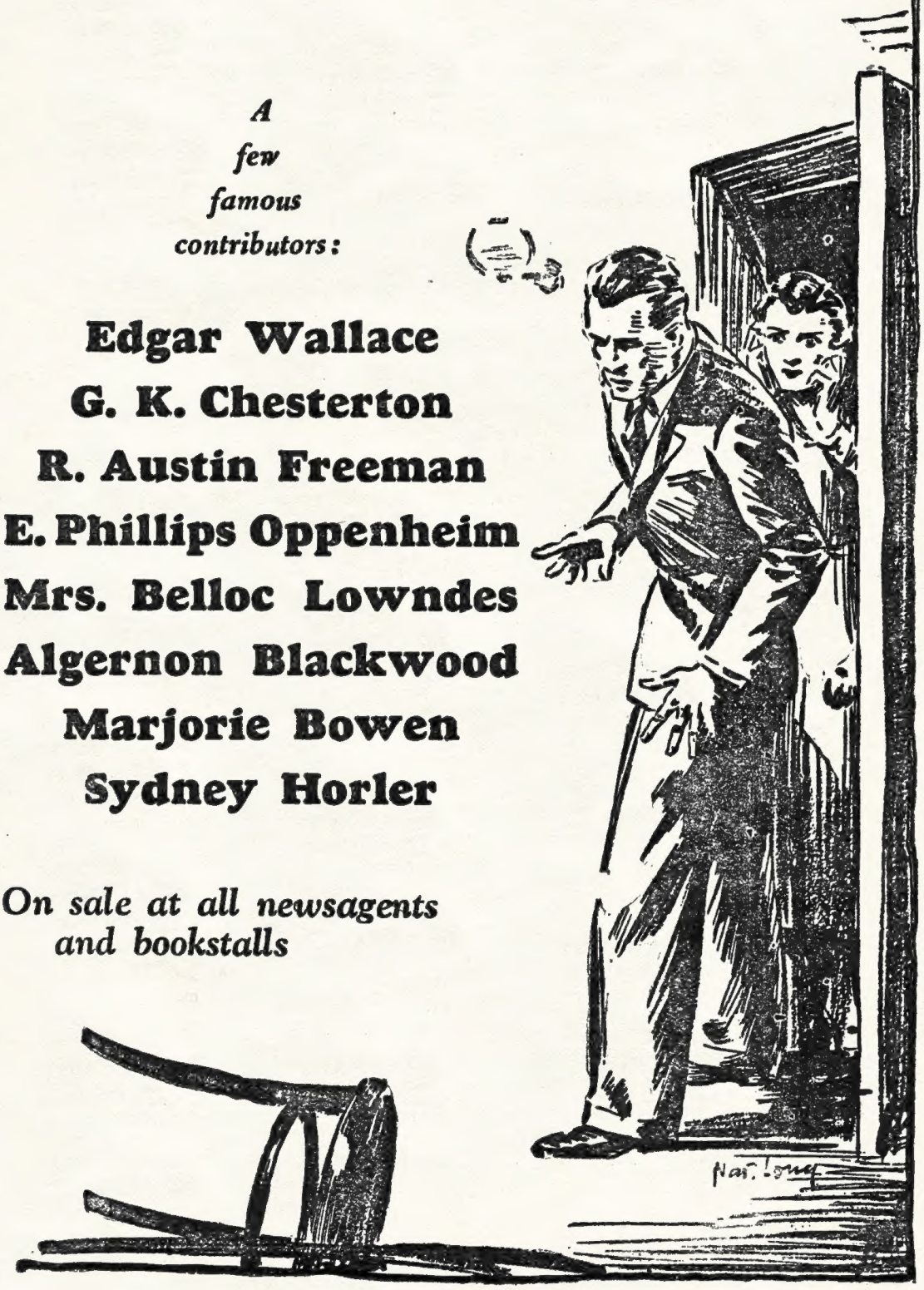

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BONES AND

DAN BRETHEA WRITES HIS OWN SIX-GUN HELL TICKET

"This is showdown," yelled Brethea and hurled himself at Torrey —only to meet the flash of Torrey's deadly hide-out gun.

For a year Dan had worked, high in the hills, shoveling sand and gravel into a long tom, washing gold, living solitary and alone. Now, with his little placer claim worked out, with the gold at the express office and with money that jingled in his pockets he was in Divide for a holiday. His wide-set gray eyes sparkled. His mouth, shaded by the small moustache that was all that the barber had left of his heavy

? ? ? WHAT CHANCE HAS A NAKED, UNARMED HOMBRE

BULLETS

COMPLETE FAST-ACTION NOVEL BY

BENNETT FOSTER

Like a startled fawn the girl stood there in the firelight and prayed for the safety of her protector.

beard, curved in a perpetual grin. Twenty-eight years old, Dan Brethea was, a kid on a holiday in town. Broad shoulders swinging. Thin, grim lips smiling. Gray eyes twinkling.

Across the street at the corner of the Exchange Saloon, a drunken plainsman in buckskin, accosted passersby with wildly waving arms. So drunk that he could barely stay on his feet despite the prop

AGAINST GUNS OF THE DEVIL'S HIRELINGS ? ? ?

afforded by the building, he bellowed his invitation to the men that hurried past. Dan grinned at the sight. He knew just how that fellow felt.

A thick, compactly built individual, dressed about as Dan was dressed in go-to-town clothes, was thrust against the drunken man by a sudden press of teamsters that issued from the Exchange. The drunken man caught this fellow by the arm and hung on to him. The thickset man shook loose, snarling. His derby was knocked from his head and trampled. The plainsman caught again at his arm. The laugh on Dan Brethea's lips was suddenly frozen. Across the street the heavyset man had moved, swift and deadly. There was the crash of an explosion and the man in buckskin was sliding down along the wall of the saloon while the thickset man, his teeth showing as he snarled, stepped back, a smoking Derringer in his hand. It was so needless, so wanton, that for a moment Dan was sick. Then the forming crowd caught him up and he was hurried across the street. He saw the thickset man swagger away.

The plainsman lay on the board walk, blood running from under him. Dan pushed back through the crowd, his broad shoulders breaking his way, and as he moved he saw another man in buckskin, bearded, his face working with passion, break through the curious onlookers and dropping to his knees, catch the dead man's head in his hands. Dan knew the kneeling man. It was Bill Rice.

"Who killed my pardner?" shrilled Bill Rice. "Who killed French?"

Dan did not wait longer. He needed that drink now, needed it badly. He broke on, back through the crowd, freed himself and walked through the deep dust, back to the Santa Fe. When he entered, the bartender lifted placid eyebrows. "Somebody get hurt?" he asked calmly.

"Killed," said Dan thickly. "A needless, useless killin'. He was drunk!"

The bartender slid out a whisky bottle and a glass. "So?" he observed. "Well, have a drink."

Dan poured the little glass full of whisky. The bartender mopped the bar gently.

"That's the third killin' in two days," he said, and there was a tinge of pride in his tone. "Divide's boomin'."

With the excitement across the street dying out, men came into the bar room. Dan caught snatches of sentences, words given in explanation to the placid bartender. The dead man, it seemed, was French Lemoin. He had been drunk. All were agreed on that. The killer was Able Torrey. Torrey was evidently an officer. He was mentioned as "The Marshal." The business of the Santa Fe went on as usual, and Dan Brethea took his fifth drink of whisky, set his glass on the bar and beckoned to the bar man.

"What'll they do about that?" he asked a little thickly when the bar man answered his gesture.

"That killin'?" The bartender shrugged fat shoulders. "Oh, they'll hold a inquest, likely. It'll be self defense. The boys say that Lemoin pulled a knife on Torrey. He'll come out all right. Do you want another drink?"

Dan felt in his pocket, pulled out a coin that glinted yellow, and tossed it on the bar. "No more," he said, and then, to himself, "Self defense!"

Sometime after ten that night, while Dan Brethea stood beside the roulette wheel in the "Palace," methodically bucking the tiger, he felt a tug on his coat sleeve. He looked around. The man who had pulled on his sleeve was an utter stranger to Dan. During the day he had met some old friends and acquaintances, and many strangers. Now he shook his arm free.

"You Dan Brethea?" the man asked shortly.

Dan nodded. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Jackling wants to see you," snapped the man, and without more ado, turned away. Dan turned back to the wheel and dropped a gold piece on the black. The words had meant nothing to him. The wheel spun and red came up. Again Dan's sleeve was jerked.

"Well?" snapped Dan Brethea.

"I said *Jackling* wants to see you." The

messenger emphasized the words. "Come along."

The croupier at Dan's right, raised his weary eyes from the spinning wheel.

"Better go, pardner," he drawled. "Jackling's a big man."

Dan shrugged. After all the thrill of his holiday was gone. "All right," he said to the messenger who held his sleeve. "All right, I'll see him."

As he followed the messenger out Dan recalled what he had heard of Jackling. Jackling was a commission man, the head of the firm of Jackling and Boyle. The firm ran wagon trains to various settlements about Divide, and was a supply house. Dan recalled that fact. He walked with a little swagger. The lights were bright and the moment was all that mattered. Dan Brethea was a little drunk.

The man he followed entered the Fresno House, passed through the bar room and passed the games, Dan close behind him. At the door of a little room in the rear of the place the guide halted. "Jackling's inside," he said briefly, and knocked on the door. It opened and the guide stepped aside to let Dan pass.

In the small room were five men, seated about a table which held a lamp, cards and chips. There were two other men standing away from the table in the shadows. Dan could not see these well. His entire attention was fixed on the man seated in the dealer's place at the green covered table. This man was gray. His face, square jawed and stern, was gray with an indoor pallor; his eyes were gray beneath bushy gray brows, the clipped moustache was gray and the thick hair that covered his head was shot with the color. He stared at Dan as the door closed.

"This is Brethea, Mister Jackling," said the guide.

"Thanks, Joe," he said casually. The guide stepped away and Dan heard the door close.

"You sent for me?" asked Dan Brethea.

Jackling appeared to be lost in a study. His eyes were still on Dan's face. Apparently he suddenly reached a decision. "I did," he said. "You've just come in from the Wet Mountain country?"

Dan nodded and Jackling tapped the top of the table with long slim fingers. The men about the table were eyeing the two. They were silent. Jackling ceased his nervous tapping. "I have a job for you," he said suddenly. "I want you to go down into that country for me."

Dan was about to speak but Jackling stayed him with a lifted hand.

"My business," said Jackling slowly, "is to gamble. I take chances where there is a possible profit. I grubstake men, send out trains, handle things on a commission. I can't afford to be cheated." He paused to let the words sink in. Dan waited.

Jackling continued. "If one man cheats me then others will think they can get away with it," he explained. "Do you understand?"

Dan nodded. He had no idea as to where this conversation was leading. Jackling glanced at the men about the table and then back to Dan. "About three months ago," he resumed, "I staked Pegleg Shannon to an outfit. You know Shannon?"

"Yes," Dan answered the question. Pegleg Shannon was an old buffalo hunter. One leg was off at the knee and Shannon walked with a peg.

"Shannon was to collect buffalo bones," Jackling's even voice continued. "He had a contract to get twelve cars to go back for bone charcoal. The sugar refineries are short of charcoal and the price is good. Shannon came to me with the proposition and I grubstaked him and let him have cattle and some wagons." He paused. Dan knew well enough the sort of proposition that had been made. He understood that Shannon would know where there were plenty of bones to be collected and shipped east to make bone charcoal.

Dan eyed Jackling. "Well?" he said.

"Well," Jackling went on, "there has been no word of Shannon and no bones have been hauled to the railroad. I want you to take a man of mine down into the Wet Mountain country and find out what's happened. If Shannon is cheating I want him brought back. If something's happened to him I want to know it. That's all. I can't afford to be cheated. You understand?"

"Yes." Dan was revolving the thing in

his mind. He could see Jackling's point of view exactly. Jackling was right. He couldn't, in his business, afford to let a man cheat him. If he did his business was gone.

"You know those hills, I've been told," said Jackling. "Will you do it?"

"You want me to take a man of yours down there," Dan stated the proposition. "You want to find out what's happened to Pegleg. If he's tryin' to gyp you, you want the outfit. If somebody's downed him you want the outfit just the same. That it?"

"Yes," Jackling nodded. "Will you go?"

Dan shook his head. "I been in those hills about a year," he answered. "I got a little money. I've come in for a time. Get somebody else."

Jackling's thin lips twitched into a grin. "I want you, Brethea," he said. "You're young but you've got a reputation. I've heard of you here and in Denver City and in Cripple Creek. Now I've seen you and I want you to go."

Again Dan shook his head gently. "I'd like to accommodate you," he answered, "but I reckon it's no go."

Jackling smiled suddenly. The smile lit his face and eyes. A dominant man, Jackling, surrounded by men who always said yes to his words. Dan felt the force of the man, the sheer magnetism of his personality. Unwillingly he liked Jackling. Here was a man who could sway other men, take them and bend them to his wishes. Jackling spoke softly.

"Why then," he said, "I'll gamble with you, Brethea. I'll cut the cards with you. If I win you go and I'll outfit you and pay you two hundred dollars for your time. If you win I'll pay you the two hundred and you'll have a better time in Divide. Will you take the chance?"

All his twenty-eight years Dan Brethea had gambled. Sometimes he had gone up against a crooked game and stacked cards, again it had been his life against another. His wide gray eyes lighted and his thin, firm lips curled in a smile.

"Why," he said slowly, "I'll go you on that, Mister Jackling."

Jackling's long fingers ruffled the deck of cards before him. He passed them to the man on the right for a cut, bunched them and pushed them out. "Cut!" he commanded.

Dan stepped forward a pace, reached down and cut the cards. Jackling in his turn picked up the top card and turned it. It was the ace of spades. Dan flipped over a trey of diamonds. With the grin still on his face he asked a question.

"Who do I take an' when do I leave, Mister Jackling?"

"Tomorrow," answered Jackling. "You'll take Torrey with you. Able!"

A man stepped out of the shadows around the lamp lit circle. It was the thickset killer. The man who, without cause or reason, had killed French Lemoin. The smile froze on Dan Brethea's face. Slowly the face hardened. He stared at Jackling.

"Torrey is an officer," said Jackling, watching Dan closely. "He needs to get out of town awhile. I'm sending him with you to represent me."

"Do you want him back?" asked Dan Brethea slowly.

Jackling moved a hand gently. "Why," he said, "that makes little difference. Able can take care of himself, I take it. I want you two to find Pegleg Shannon, and if not that, find out what has become of him. I can't afford to be cheated, Brethea."

Torrey was scowling at Dan. His lips, sensuous and thick, were drawn back a little from his teeth. "You needn't to worry," he growled. "I'll get back all right."

Dan looked at the man and then back to Jackling. "Why then," he drawled, "I reckon my word's good. We'll leave in the mornin'."

TRAITOR GUNS

"Boyle will take care of you at the warehouse," Jackling spoke slowly. "Get your outfit there tomorrow. And Brethea, Torry will take charge of things when you find Shannon. Torrey's my representative," continued Jackling.

Dan nodded. "I see," he said, and continued his interrupted progress to the door.

Behind him he heard Torrey mumble something, but he couldn't catch the words. Jackling made no response. Someone beside the table said: "That's that, Jackling. Let's play cards."

Dan closed the door behind him.

The evening of the fifth day out of Divide Dan Brethea rode down a long slope into a valley. Behind him were the two pack mules carrying a meager outfit, and behind the mules Able Torrey rode, humped in his saddle.

It was a different Dan Brethea from the dandy of Divide's dusty street. Gone now were the dress-up suit and the derby. Gone were the collar and the flowing silk tie. Instead heavy worn buckskins clung to his broad shoulders, and the wide brimmed, low crowned hat was battered and stained. About his middle the shell belt held his heavy Colt in place, and under his left leg the stock of his 40-90 Sharps Carbine rested. Dan looked across the valley to where smoke rose from beside a green traced stream, and then turned and glanced back at his companion.

Torrey had not fitted himself for the trail. The derby hat did not shade his face from the sun and his cheeks were red beneath the stubble of beard. His suit was wrinkled, torn in a place or two. The saddle chafed him. Able Torrey was miserable and he growled his complaints on any and all occasions.

Dan despised the man. Torrey could not carry his end. He was helpless about a camp, helpless in handling the mules. It was all that he could do to sit his horse. Worse than this, Torrey was dirty. Dirt is no accomplishment on the trail. It is easily acquired and is avoided only by constant effort. Dan, who bathed daily in that country of running water, found that Torrey welcomed filth. He would not even wash his hands and face in the morning, preferring, rather, to let that duty go. Dan did the cooking, washed the dishes, wrangled the animals, attended to all the details of the camp work, and Torrey growled at his discomfort and, under compulsion, brought in wood for the fire. That was his sole and only aid.

Having definitely located the smoke near the creek, Dan headed toward it. He had already scouted likely spots in the foothills of the Wets but had made no discoveries nor had he found any word among the men they chanced to meet, as to Shannon. Somewhere in these hills there must be a spot where buffalo bones were plentiful. Dan knew definitely that Shannon had headed toward the Wet Mountains, and had planned his search accordingly. The two mules followed Dan's big bay gelding and Torrey followed the mules. At the bottom of the slope Dan stopped. The mules fell to grazing and Torrey rode up alongside.

It was wanton, unwarranted killing. Torrey's gun roared and the slug caught its victim squarely in the back.

The Robinhood Of Trouble Range Writes An I. O. U. In Blood And Pays Off With Bullets.

"What you stoppin' here for?" he demanded querously.

"Camp by the creek tonight," answered Dan. "See the smoke? There's an outfit there."

"It's all damn' foolishness if you ask me," complained Torrey. "What does Jackling care about a few wagons an' some cattle? Hell! He could afford to lose ten times that!"

Under the stubble of beard Dan's face was sardonic. "You shouldn't holler," he returned. "It's takin' you out of town. If you'd stayed in Divide likely you'd of had Bill Rice's knife amongst yore guts before this. I'd think you'd be grateful."

Dan knew that Torrey feared Bill Rice, feared the vengeance that that weathered old plainsman would demand for the killing of French Lemoin. Torrey was along, not only because Jackling wished it, but also because the former night marshal of Divide feared for his life.

"Bill Rice!" Torrey snarled the words. "I'll kill him like I done his partner. Hell! I'm not afraid of Bill Rice!"

"Sooooo?" Dan's drawl was far from soothing. He liked to torment Torrey. Despising the man he liked to make his life miserable. "Then why was you so particular about me hidin' our trail?" Dan's short laugh was a bark. "No, you ain't afraid of Bill Rice. Yo're just scared to death of him, that's all. Quit throwin' yore bluff an' let's go."

Torrey snarled at the taller, younger man. "Someday I'm goin' to kill you, Brethea," he growled. "You'll go too far—"

Dan laughed again. "You ride behind me all day," he drawled. "You've had yore chances! Come on! Get goin'!"

Dan stirred the bay into action. The mules strung out behind the gelding and once more Torrey dropped into place behind the mules. His face was not a pretty thing to see. Torrey hated Dan Brethea, hated him for his competency, his fearlessness, and above all for the contempt that Dan made no effort to hide. Riding there behind the mules Torrey touched the butt of the big Colt that hung under his coat. Someday he'd use that gun. Someday, when they were back in Divide he'd blast Dan Brethea off the face of the earth. Torrey's grin was wolfish. Not yet, though. Now was not the time. Wait until they were back in town.

As they crossed the valley toward the creek, Dan turned a little to the west. The fire was in a grove of cottonwoods and the grayish white top of a wagon showed between the trees. Drawing nearer Dan could see two yoke of oxen, necked together, grazing out on the flat, and near the trees a small boy appeared, only to turn back into the grove. Dan went on.

He skirted the cottonwoods, the mules and Torrey behind him, and suddenly was at the wagon. It was a heavy wheeled, canvas covered affair, as familiar to Dan as the thin smoke from the cottonwood fire. The thing that caused him to draw his horse up short and to stare wide eyed, was the girl who came around the wagon and toward him.

She was young, this girl, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years old. The tattered overalls and shirt she wore did not conceal her budding womanhood. Her feet were bare, as were her arms, and both arms and feet were scarred and scratched. Her hair had been cut off short at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were wide and blue and her face, not quite that of a child and yet oddly immature, was marked by astonishment.

"Hello, Sis," said Dan Brethea.

The girl returned the greeting gravely. "Hello."

"Where's yore dad?" Dan's eyes examined the wagon and the cottonwoods.

The girl shook her head. From behind the wagon the small boy that Dan had seen, peered curiously. Torrey had ridden past the mules and was flanking Dan. "My Pappy's daid," said the girl, in her voice the peculiar inflection that marks the Texan.

"Dead?" Dan echoed the word. "Who's with yuh, Sis?"

Again the shake of the lank hair. "Nobuddy. I'm travelin' alone with Bud."

Dan slid down from his saddle. "How come?" he demanded. "You got no business alone in this country."

The girl examined Dan. Some of the astonishment and fright left her face. She answered frankly. "We're headin' for Divide," she said. "Pappy an' Bud an' me started out but Pappy got took with a misery back apiece an' he died. Bud an' me are goin' on."

Dan said, "Well, I'll be—" slowly, and then stopped.

What's yore name, kid?" demanded Torrey from beside Dan.

"Kitty Land. My Pap's name was Sam Land. We alls from Texas."

Torrey laughed, harsh and sudden. The girl flinched from the sound. Dan Brethea shook his head. "You oughtn't to be out here alone," he announced. "It's bad. There's—" Again he stopped. No need to frighten this child.

"We come a right fur piece alone already," announced Kitty Land, her head up. "I reckon we can make it. Who are you all?"

"My name's Dan Brethea," Dan answered the question. "This is Able Torrey. We're takin' a little trip."

"Prospectin'?" shrewdly.

"You might call it that. We're lookin' for bones. Buffalo bones. You seen any?"

Kitty Land's face brightened. "Yesterday," she answered. "We was acomin' acrost that valley back yonder," she gestured toward the south, "an' we seen a might of 'em. Somebody had been a pickin' 'em up. There was a big pile over clost to the hills. Bud went over an' seen 'em."

Dan looked at Torrey and nodded. This was a clue, the first clue. Torrey was staring at the girl. As Dan watched him he saw Torrey lick his thin lips.

"See anybody over there?" Dan asked casually.

The girl shook her head. "Nary a soul," she said. "Is there money in buffaler bones, mister?"

"Not much," replied Dan. "We're goin' to camp apiece above you. I reckon I'll try for a deer. Could you use some meat?"

"We got corn meal an' pork," answered the girl. "You bet we could use some meat, mister."

Dan stuck his toe in his stirrup and swung up on the bay. "I'll try to bring yuh some," he said. "Come on, Torrey."

Above the cottonwood grove a short distance up the creek, Dan stopped his horse. He waited until Torrey came up and then gestured toward the pack animals. "Make camp," he ordered. "You ought to know how by now. I'm goin' out an' try for some meat."

Wordlessly Torrey crawled down from his saddle. Where Dan had expected objections, none were forthcoming. It startled Dan a little. He couldn't understand this sudden acquiescence. Still he took advantage of it. Leaving Torrey on the camp site he had chosen, he started the bay on up toward the foothills.

Little more than a mile from camp Dan found deer sign. Leaving his horse tied to a cottonwood by the creek, he took his Sharps and progressed afoot further up the creek. Within two hundred yards of the horse he jumped game, four deer. The Sharps came up and belched smoke and lead, and a yearling buck a hundred yards away turned a somersault and lay kicking, his neck broken.

Dan stuck and hog-dressed the deer and then went back for the bay. He loaded the little buck across the saddle and, leading the horse, started back toward the camp. He had been gone less than an hour.

It took him about twenty minutes to walk the first mile, leading the bay. Ten more minutes saw him almost to the camp. As he climbed a low knoll that was in his path he heard, from the direction of the camp, a shrill scream. Whether it was the girl, Kitty, or her small brother, Bud, that had screamed, Dan could not say, but he pushed the deer from the saddle, threw himself up on the horse and set out at full speed. That scream had carried terror.

With the bay gelding full out and running, Dan pounded toward the camp. It was almost dark. As he came in to the cottonwood grove, the bay's feet pounding a muffled tattoo on the sod, he saw a figure

dart past the fire. Another, bulkier figure followed, running clumsily. Dan slid the gelding to a stop and hit the ground before the horse had quit moving. Sprinting toward the fire he rounded the end of the wagon just in time to have Kitty Land run past him. In the next second Able Torrey crashed into Dan and rebounded. Torrey was out of breath but beyond the wagon the girl's shrill screams could be heard, and in the wagon Dan could hear Bud sobbing.

Torrey staggered back from his encounter with Brethea and Dan took two swift steps forward and struck down with his hand, knocking to the ground the gun that Torrey was pulling.

"What's happenin' here?" he demanded sternly.

Torrey did not answer. His breath was coming hard but he lunged in. Brethea met him, body against body. For a moment the two stood, locked together, then Torrey was flung back, reeling into the firelight.

The man did not go down. Able Torrey was no weakling. He regained his balance with an effort. Again Dan made stern demand:

"What's happenin' here? Torrey, did you—"

The boy, Bud, came crawling from the wagon. One side of his face was bruised and discolored. Tears streaked through the dirt on his cheeks. From the far end of the wagon Kitty Land came cautiously. Her lank hair was disheveled and her shirt had been ripped so that one shoulder, rounded and feminine, showed through the tear.

"Yuh would, Torrey," Dan said through clenched teeth. "Yuh would! I'll learn yuh!"

Like a big cat he leaped then, closing in on Able Torrey, and Torrey, with a roar, received him.

Dan needed no explanation of what had happened. Torrey's willingness to make camp, the lack of objections on his part, was explained now. Dan knew almost as though he had seen it, what had happened at the camp during his absence. The two met with a shock and the dull crash of blows against flesh mingled with the snapping of the cottonwood sticks in the fire.

For perhaps a minute the two men stood so, almost together, their arms flailing. Then again they broke, Torrey retreating under the hail of blows that poured into his body. He went back, reeling, caught himself from falling, with one extended arm, and from near the wagon came the boy's voice, high and shrill.

"Look out! He's got a gun!"

Metal glinted in Torrey's hand. Dan dived as Torrey's arm came up. The Derringer that Torrey had pulled, crashed loudly in Dan's ears and powder burned his cheek. Dan caught that extended hand and wrenched with all his strength. The Derringer flew wide, falling almost at Bud Land's feet, and now with a cold and passionless fury, Dan Brethea began systematically to cut Able Torrey to pieces.

He moved around the man like a cooper about a barrel. His long arms, with hard, hammerlike hands clenched, shot out as he sidled in and out. Torrey fought back under the attack. Fought as any cornered animal will fight, but before that cold, hard fury he was helpless. When Torrey raised his arm to protect his battered face, Dan shifted his attack to the man's soft midrift, and when the thick arms came down to ward off those punishing blows, hard hands smacked against Torrey's face. He tried to turn and run, but was forestalled. He cried out for mercy and the cry was smashed back into his bleeding lips. It was the girl, Kitty Land herself, who stopped the slaughter. She ran from the wagon and caught at Dan's arm.

"Don't, Mister!" she cried. "Don't! You'll kill him!"

Dan shook free from the girl's clasp, measured his man and sent in one final, crashing blow. Torrey sagged. His knees had turned liquid. He folded forward and fell on his face, and with his breath coming in hard, rasping gasps, Dan stepped back.

"What'd he do to you?" Dan panted.

Kitty Land stared up into Dan's face. There was adoration in her eyes. "He come to camp," she said. "He come in here an' begun talkin' an' a honeyin' around. Then he put his arm around me an' tried to kiss me. I was fryin' pork an' I hit his hand with the skillet. He

cussed somethin' awful and started after me. I dodged an' he tored my skirt. Bud grabbed at him an' he hit Bud an' knocked him down. Then he come after me agin. I knowed what he was goin' to do, Mister." Fright showed again in the girl's eyes at the recollection. "I run an' I yelled an' then you come. I trust you, Mister."

Again she put her little, scratched hand on Dan's sleeve. Dan looked down at her. He nodded.

"It's all right now," he told her, and then frowned.

"You got no business bein' out here alone," he announced. "I don't know what I'm goin' to do with you."

Bud Land came toward the two. He had picked up Torrey's big pistol and now he stopped near the fire and retrieved the Derringer. Dan shook his head. He was in a quandary.

"We'll be all right," the girl told him. Some of her self-reliance had returned. "You all leave us them guns an' we'll make out. I can shoot. Pappy learned me."

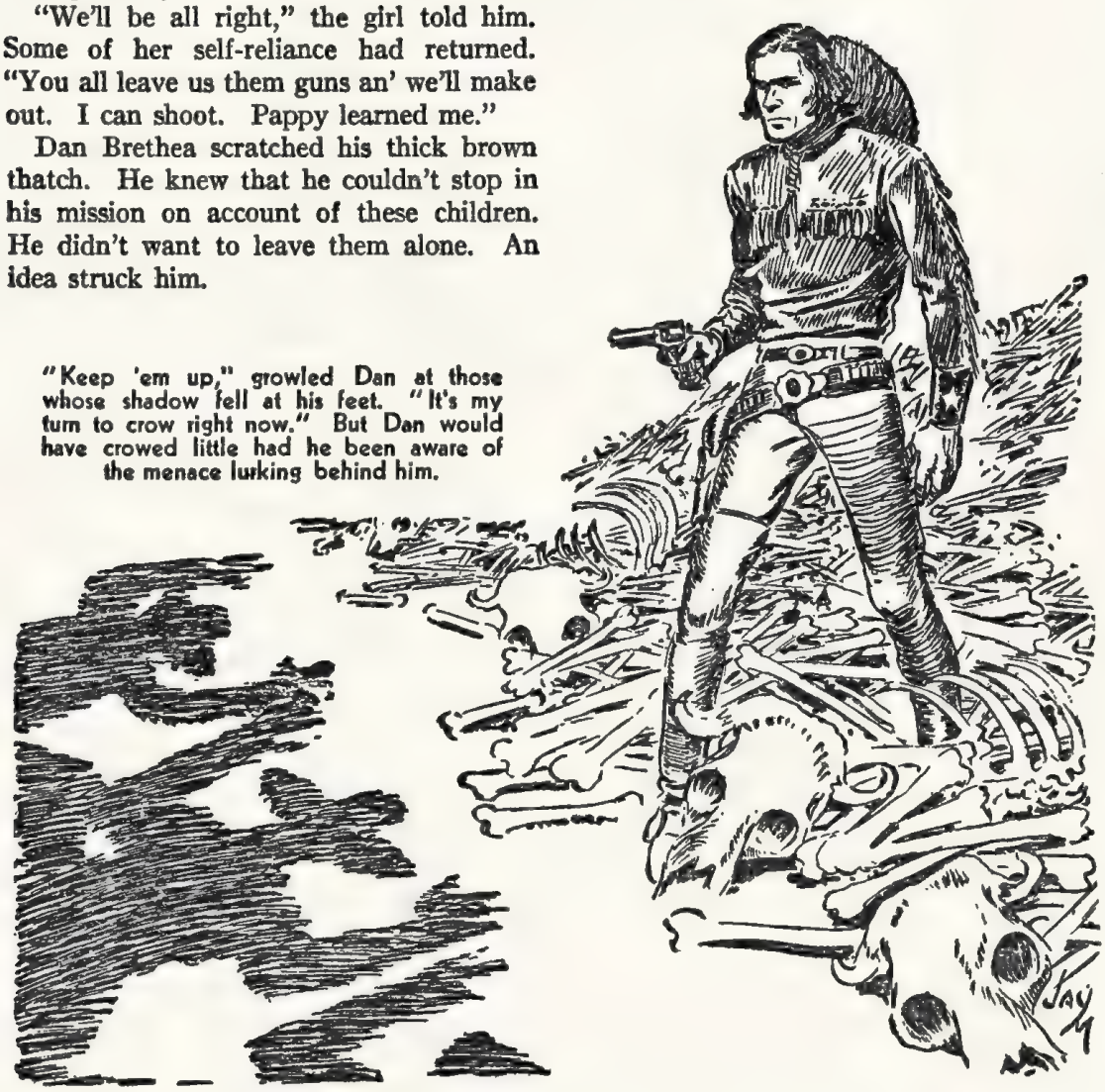
Dan Brethea scratched his thick brown thatch. He knew that he couldn't stop in his mission on account of these children. He didn't want to leave them alone. An idea struck him.

"Listen," he said, "I can't go with you. I'll leave you them guns, like you say. I'm goin' to write you a letter to take to a man in Divide. If you meet anybody show it to 'em. They ain't all like that fello'." He gestured toward Torrey, who was stirring on the ground. "You show the letter I'll write an' keep the guns handy an' you'll come through all right, I reckon."

Kitty Land nodded. "We're agoin' to Divide, Mister," she said. "We'll git through."

"You got any paper?" asked Dan, moving toward the wagon.

Bud forestalled him. Delving into the back of the wagon he brought out a piece of brown wrapping paper. It was greasy. Evidently it had at some time covered salt pork. Dan took the sheet. He pulled a shell from his belt and with that crude pen-



"Keep 'em up," growled Dan at those whose shadow fell at his feet. "It's my turn to crow right now." But Dan would have crowed little had he been aware of the menace lurking behind him.

cil, using the tail gate of the wagon for a desk, scrawled a note.

"Here," he said when he had finished, "you take that to Jackling when you get to Divide. He'll take care of you. Now we'll get the shell for them guns."

It took Dan but a few seconds to strip off Torrey's shell belt. He held it out to the girl, who already had the note. She took it and eyed Dan curiously.

"What you goin' to do now?" she asked.

"I'm goin' to take him," Dan jerked a thumb toward Torrey, "an' push on a piece. You won't be bothered no more with him. There's a little buck deer lyin' up the valley a ways. He's down under a rise. You can have him."

The girl's eyes lighted. "Ain't you goin' to stay, Mister?" she asked. "I ain't afraid when yo're around. You—"

Dan shook his head brusquely. "Nope," he interrupted. "I'm goin' on. You'll make it through all right."

Without another word he stooped, lifted Torrey and putting the limp man over his shoulder strode away from the fire.

Dan's own mount was grazing a short distance away. The trailing reins of the bridle had kept him close, for when he tried to travel he stepped on the reins. Dan, carrying Torrey, went to the horse. He caught the animal, heaved Torrey from his shoulder to the saddle and with the man lying limply across the leather, started back up the valley.

"I'LL KILL YOU, BRETHEA!"

ABOVE the wagon and the campfire at the spot where he had left the mules some time before, Dan dumped Torrey from the horse. Torrey groaned and stirred and Dan pushed him callously with his booted foot. He had not killed Torrey for one reason and for one reason alone. Jackling had made him more or less responsible for the man and Dan's word was good. Leaving Torrey he moved in a circle about the spot. In the semi-gloom of the starlit night be found Torrey's horse and the mules. Torrey had tied the animals, but had made no move toward unpacking. Dan grunted his contempt for the man and untying Torrey's horse, led the animal over to the man on the ground. He lifted Torrey, depositing him like a sack of meal across the saddle, and lashed the man in place with the rope that was at the saddle horn. Then, returning to the mules he freed them and mounting his horse, started the little caravan toward the south.

For two hours Dan rode steadily. Torrey had regained consciousness, but Dan paid no attention to his groans, curses or pleas. At the end of the two hours he stopped and dismounting, made camp in the night. He dumped the packs from the mules and unsaddling them affixed hobbles and turned them loose. He hobbled his own bay horse and when all that was done, unloaded Torrey, unsaddled and hobbled Torrey's horse, then came back to the man who lay stiff and helpless on the ground.

Dan squatted beside Torrey, pulled a block of sulphur matches from his pocket and lit one. In the bluish-yellow light of the burning match he looked at Torrey. The face of the marshal of Divide was cut and puffed. The left eye was swollen tight shut, the man's lips were bruised, and his nose was swollen to twice its natural size. Dan looked contentedly at his handiwork. Torrey's one good eye gleamed murderously in the light. The match went out and Dan spoke in a slow, even drawl.

"I aimed to kill you, Torrey," he said. "I do yet. When we get back to Divide I'll down you sure. Yo're a low-lived, murderous, cheatin' skunk. Jackling sent you with me an' I'll take you back to him. Yore guns are gone. I give 'em to the girl you tried to get. I've watched you before an' I'll watch closer now. If you make a crooked move I'll take back yore carcass. Understand, Torrey?"

Torrey made no response. Dan spread a saddle blanket on the ground and spoke again. "Yore blanket's right beside you. You can crawl on it if you want."

He left Torrey then and went to where his own saddle lay, the blanket across it. Dan stretched himself out, pillowing his head on the saddle and with the sweaty blanket beneath him. For awhile he lay quiet listening to Torrey's rasping breathing, and looked up at the stars. Then he

slept. Dan knew that he was safe, for the moment, at least. Steel nerves, that like a set trigger sent him instantly into action, senses that never entirely slept, and self-confidence, protected him.

When the first faint, cold light of morning tinged the east, Dan was up. Torrey was lying huddled on his saddle blanket. He groaned when Dan wakened him. Every muscle in Torrey's body protested. He was bruised and battered. Dan himself had not come through the fight unscathed. His body, too, protested, but he worked his stiffened muscles and, forcing them to motion, also forced out the stiffness. He made Torrey get up and then went about the business of catching and saddling the animals. The packs had not been disturbed. Dan put them on the crossbuck saddles that adorned the mules, saddled his own and Torrey's horses and then ordered Torrey to mount.

Torrey climbed up into the saddle and Dan swung up on his own horse. He fell in beside Torrey and started the mules along. They were still on the long slope of the hill and behind him Dan could see a trickle of smoke from the fire at the Land wagon. He spoke briefly to the battered man beside him.

"We'll make camp on the other side," he said. "Clean up an' get a meal. I think this must be what we're lookin' for."

Torrey groaned. His left eye was the color of raw beefsteak, his lips were cut and puffed. He was in a deplorable condition. Dan eyed him.

"You an' me," said Dan suddenly, "are out here on business. I plan to clean it up as quick as I can. I give yore guns to that girl. From now on yo're just along."

Torrey snarled, "Damn you!" through his battered lips and Dan grinned faintly.

"You was goin' to kill Shannon when we found him," he announced. "I know that was yore idea. Jackling didn't say he wanted Shannon killed. He said he wanted his outfit back. I wouldn't of let you down Shannon anyhow. You might just as well grin an' bear it."

"I'll kill you, Brethea," Torrey's voice was very earnest.

"You will if you get the chance," answered Dan. "I don't aim to let you have it."

He swung away from Torrey to turn a mule back in line. Torrey's one good eye glinted balefully.

They topped out over the long rise of the valley and began a descent. Before them was a green panorama. Another valley, wide but not so wide as the one behind them, lay ahead. At its westen end the valley narrowed, converging into a canyon that entered the foothills perhaps five miles distant. There was a white scar in the grass near the creek that came from the canyon. The two rode on down.

As they reached the valley floor they saw that the white scar had become a mound, and as they rode on a horseman detached himself from the trees behind the mound and came toward them. Dan neither slowed nor hastened the pace and when they were close enough to see that the white mound was a pile of bones, the horseman met them.

The rider was a tall man, gaunt and rawboned. Buckskin covered him. There was a rifle in a saddle scabbard under his leg and a gun belt with a pistol and a knife, strapped around his middle. He was bearded and shaggy, both hair and beard so light as to be flaxen, and under the shading hat brim, his eyes looked white. Dan reined in. The rider also stopped and the three men surveyed each other. Presently this newcomer spoke:

"Howdy." His voice rasped.

Dan nodded a greeting. "Howdy," he said.

"Travelin'?" asked the rider.

"A ways," answered Dan. "You camped here?"

"Above here. We're gatherin' bones."

The lie was patent. This man might be a trapper, he might be a prospector, he might be a renegade, but he was certainly not of the type that would spend patient

hours picking up buffalo bones and stacking them. There was a restlessness, a feline grace of movement, a fierce light in the almost white eyes that belied the man's announcement. Dangerous this fellow was, certainly. Dan could almost feel it.

"Got quite a rick of 'em," said Dan.

Torrey was eyeing the rider. He spoke suddenly. "We're lookin'—" he began.

Dan stopped him. It would not do, he felt, to blurt their errand. "We're lookin' for a place to camp," he said. "My pardner had a little accident last night."

The man with the white eyes laughed. "Looks like he tangled with a bar," he said. "There's nothin' to stop you campin' by the creek."

Dan nodded. "We'll do that then," he announced. And then casually, "Where are you fellows camped?"

"Up above." The tall man jerked an arm toward the hills. "There's three of us."

"My name's Brethea," said Dan pointedly. "This here is Able Torrey, my pardner."

The rider nodded. Apparently he did not feel it incumbent upon him to give his name. "You can camp by the creek," he announced as though granting a favor. "The water's purty good."

Without another word then he wheeled his horse and rode west toward the hills. Dan watched him go. When the man was out of earshot Dan turned to Torrey. "This is the place, I reckon," he said.

Torrey made no answer. There was something on his mind. His one good eye had a reflective gleam in it. Dan started ahead and Torrey, after a moment, followed him.

They made camp near the trickling creek, the long, low rick of bones perhaps fifty yards away. Dan busied himself in preparing the camp, and Torrey, groaning as he moved, unsaddled his horse. Dan hobbled the animals and turned them loose. He opened the packs, then spoke to Torrey.

"I'm goin' to wash. I'll get breakfast pretty soon."

Torrey did not answer. Taking his own rifle, Dan walked over to Torrey's saddle and pulled out the rifle from its sheath. "Just to stop any accidents," he said.

Torrey grunted. He had run his fingers through his hair. Other than that he made no toilet. Dan went off toward the creek carrying the two rifles under one arm, a bucket dangling from his other hand.

At the creek Dan stripped and washed, the icy water refreshing him. There were angry red blotches on his skin where Torrey's blows had gone home. Having finished his bath, Dan went up the creek a short distance to dip his bucket. He had filled it and was ready to return, when he stopped short. The water of the creek had suddenly become a little murky. There was a milky tinge that he had not noticed.

Dan looked at it long, then nodded and started back to camp carrying the rifles and the bucket. He knew what had roiled the water. For almost a year he had seen creek water do just that on the other side of the Wets. Someone up the creek was working a rocker or a long tom. There was a placer mine somewhere above. Bone gatherers, indeed! Dan now knew definitely that the white-eyed man had lied!

When he reached the camp Torrey had collected a little wood and a fire was going. The squat man looked up as Dan came in. Dan opened his mouth to speak to tell Torrey what he had been, but Torrey forestalled him.

"Look here, Brethea," said Torrey, "you an' me are goin' to have this out. I aim to kill you' an you know it. I reckon you feel the same way about me. We got a settlement comin'."

Dan nodded. "Yeah," he drawled. "We have. Want it now?"

Torrey shook his head. "Not now," he said with finality. "Later. When we get back to town. Right now I want my rifle. You took my other guns an' give 'em to that slut of a gal. This here is dangerous. I remembered who that white-eyed feller was. I've seen him once before. He's Utah Wirth an' he's bad. I want my gun."

"So you can use it on me, I reckon," Dan flung the words at his companion.

Torrey shook his head. "You'll need me to help yuh get out of here," he predicted.

"Wirth is bad an' he's got a pardner that's worse. A feller named Dutch Selig. I got a hunch. You give me that rifle."

Dan studied a moment. There was a force in Torrey's voice, a ring of truth. Dan laid his own rifle on the ground, walked over and leaned Torrey's weapon against the man's saddle.

"There's yore gun," he said. "God help you if yuh try to use it on me. Get that, Torrey?"

Torrey nodded. "I got it," he said sullenly and then, looking Dan squarely in the eyes: "I hate yore guts, Brethea, but I'm goin' to need yuh to help me out of here. I know it."

Dan walked over to the crackling fire. "Mebbe we'll both need help," he said slowly. "Them fellows got a gold mine up the creek."

sacks. Gold! The spell of the word held Torrey.

Dan began cooking. He brought utensils and food from the packs and fell to work near the fire. Torrey sat motionless, looking at the hills.

When the meal was ready Dan called Torrey. The man came and ate of the salt pork, biscuits and coffee that Dan had provided. He had nothing to say.

They finished eating and Dan cleaned up the dishes and the frying pan and coffee pot. He set the camp to rights and prepared to leave. Before he went out to the horses he spoke to his companion.

"I think that this is where Shannon headed," he said. "There's lots of bones an' it would be a good place, though it's quite a chunk from the railroad. I'm goin'

Gold And Lead Are Weighed Against Each Other When A Killer Plays With The Justice Scales

Torrey received that announcement in silence. For a long moment he stared at Dan Brethea. Then he started up suddenly. "How do you know?" he snapped. Gold, the mere mention of the word had taken all the stiffness from Torrey's body, all the soreness from his bones.

"I seen tailin's in the creek," replied Dan, simply. "It's clouded."

"Gold." Torrey's voice was soft with awe.

Dan nodded. "I'm goin' to scout a little after we eat," he announced.

Torrey paid no attention to the words. He was staring up the valley toward the two hills that constricted the valley's girth.

"Gold," he said again.

There was something amusing to Dan in Torrey's attitude. He knew that, in all likelihood, Torrey had never taken gold from the earth. The man was a gambler, a killer who preyed on men as they came in from the hills. Torrey, probably, had never done an honest day's work in his life. He knew nothing of the toil with shovel and pick, of the struggle with water and rock and gravel, that put the yellow metal, worshipped by men, into pouches and

to scout around an' see if I can find any sign of him bein' here."

Torrey nodded. He was not, apparently, interested in Shannon or their mission.

"I'll try to spot where they're workin', too," Dan continued. "It's up the canyon someplace."

Torrey's eyes lighted at the words. "Mebbe we can get in," he said, unconsciously including Dan. "There might be a place we could stake."

Dan shook his head. "Not likely," he replied. "They'll be watchin' us. I'm goin' to ride out east, circle, an' come in above."

Able Torrey nodded. "They'll be watchin'," he said.

Dan picked up his saddle and gear. "I'll leave it to you," he said briefly. "You watch the camp. If these fellows are as bad as you say, they'll take watchin'."

He caught up his horse, saddled, mounted and rode back to the camp. There he stopped and took his rifle, putting it in the saddle scabbard. Somehow he felt better with that eleven pounds of wood and iron under his leg. Dan knew that rifle. At four or five hundred yards he could drop a man with a single 330-grain slug

from its heavy barrel. So, fully equipped, he lifted his hand to Torrey and started east.

BLOODY GOLD

He rode down the valley for perhaps two miles. The grass that carpeted the ground was thick and curly. Occasionally white blotches showed where some buffalo had died and yielded his hide to a hunter. At one spot near the creek there were hundreds of skeletons. Here had been a veritable buffalo slaughter house. Hunters, hidden in the willow fringe of the creek, had dropped buffalo after buffalo. The bay gelding's feet clicked against bones as he moved. Probably, Dan thought, that long rick of bones near the camp, had come from just such a spot as this.

He reflected, as he rode, on his errand and on the likelihood of its accomplishment. This valley, he believed, was the place Pegleg Shannon had sought. As a hunter Pegleg had garnered the hide harvest, and now, with the buffalo gone, the old man had returned to glean the field of their bones. Dan wondered what had happened to Shannon. Was the old man still alive? Or had he and the three natives that had comprised his crew, fallen foul of Wirth and his men.

Dan grinned suddenly. He had no knowledge that this was even the right place. There was no sign of Shannon. Wirth and the men with Wirth might have honestly come to collect bones and stumbled on gold sign by accident. Dan, hidden now from the camp by the low rolls of earth that came from the valley's sides, swung toward the south and started toward the ridge. It was time to circle.

Dan hugged the south side of the ridge while he rode back toward the west. He stayed near the top and twice he stopped and, leaving his horse below the ridge, crawled to the brow and looked down at the valley. He saw the camp below, just as he had left it. The fire, almost dead, was trickling smoke skyward. Torrey was not in sight.

The long south ridge of the valley rose toward the minor foothills, and Dan, following it, was presently in the pines. Now the going was more rapid. Dan pushed along through the trees, turning now toward the north. Where two ridges joined the one he traveled, he stopped his horse, dismounted and tying the animal and carrying his rifle went forward. He scouted down through the trees until he could see the canyon at the end of the valley. Immediately below him the canyon was narrow, but above, toward the west, there appeared to be an opening. Dan went toward it and when he could see well, halted.

The canyon had opened out into a little circular park. There were two dugouts against the south wall. Rock had been carried and laid up to form the front walls of these. There were wagons in the park; that is, the running gear of wagons was still in evidence, for the wagon boxes had been removed. Dan surmised that these had been used to make doors for the dugouts, and probably crude mining machinery for the placer that he was sure existed.

From there he could see a portion of the creek and he was sure that it was roiled with tailings. The water had a peculiar whitish color evident at even that distance. There were two yoke of cattle in the park. Probably the bull teams that had hauled the six wagons had been used for food and these four big oxen were all that remained.

Dan smiled to himself. He couldn't be sure that the wagons and teams had been part of Pegleg Shannon's outfit but he felt reasonably sure that they were. He could almost reconstruct what had happened. Almost but not quite. Satisfied with his scouting and not wishing to go down to the cabins Dan went back to his horse, mounted, and pursuing the same circuitous trail, started back to the camp and Torrey.

When Dan rode in Torrey came from among the trees, carrying the rifle that Dan had left him. The man seemed glad that Dan was back. It was queer. Here Torrey had vowed to kill Dan Brethea, and Dan never for an instant forgot that he intended to end Torrey's career at the first opportunity, and yet they were thrown together by mutual interest, forced to pro-

tect each other. Dan almost voiced his thoughts, but held his tongue. He couldn't bring himself to be friendly with Torrey, not in the slightest degree.

"Anybody been here?" Dan asked, as he dismounted.

Torrey shook his head. "I stayed back in them trees with the rifle," he said, "but nobody come. What did you find out?"

"I ain't sure," Dan said slowly, pulling his latigo loose, "but I think this is the place we're lookin' for. There's a park up in the canyon with a couple of shacks in it. There's the runnin' gear of six wagons an' there's a couple of yoke of cattle. The creek's muddy. They're placerin' up above. I kind of believe that them wagons an' the steers was what Shannon had."

"Did you see the mine?" asked Torrey eagerly.

Dan shook his head. "It's there though," he said. "I'd sure like to know if they were Shannon's wagons. If I knowed that—"

"Look here, Brethea," Torrey interrupted, "what difference does it make about the wagons? There's gold up above here. Gold, man!" Torrey's voice was eager. Apparently he was trying to bring himself to some point, about to offer some idea or suggestion. Dan looked at the squat man and lifted his eyebrows in interrogation.

"Get it out, Torrey," he commanded.

Torrey took a long breath and plunged. "What the hell do you care about Jackling?" he snapped. "Jackling cheated you when he cut them cards. He's a card slick an' he bent the deck for you. Look a here! There's gold up there. You an' me know it. What's to hinder us from slippin' out of here early in the mornin' an' layin' on the hill above them cabins? There can't be more'n three or four of 'em up there. With the rifles we could down 'em as they come out an' then we'd have the mine an' the gold they had. To hell with Jackling! There's gold—"

"Torrey," said Dan Brethea calmly, "yo're a louse. Just a damn' little gray backed louse. I got no doubt but that you'd do just what you say. Bushwhack them fellers an' take their gold. That's yore style. The point is you ain't goin' to do it."

"No?" snarled Torrey. "Who says so? What—?"

"I say so. If this is Shannon's camp an' them fellows have jumped his claim, that's one thing; but if it ain't we're goin' right along lookin' for Shannon. Get me?"

Torrey's face, the beardless portion, was ashen with rage. His eyes were black with it. Dan stood, loose limbed and apparently careless, but his gray eyes were alert. For an instant Torrey stood poised. Then his muscles relaxed. Apparently he had given up. He turned his eyes away from Dan Brethea.

"All right," he grumbled. "I suppose it's all right if you say so."

Dan shrugged. "If it's all right, put down yore rifle an' get some wood," he ordered. "I don't trust you, Torrey."

Torrey, oddly acquiescent, leaned his rifle against his saddle. He walked over to where the pack saddles lay, picked up the ax and started into the cottonwoods. Dan, his brow furrowed by a puzzled frown, watched the man go. It wasn't like Torrey to act this way. It wasn't in the man's nature. Torrey was planning something, plotting some evil. Still frowning, Dan walked down toward the bone pile. He wondered what it was that Torrey was revolving in that evil, torturous mind. Certainly something that boded no good for Dan Brethea. Yet Torrey couldn't go against him. It wasn't in the cards that Torrey would suggest killing Wirth and the men with Wirth, and yet plot against Dan. What was it then? Dan didn't know. If Wirth was as bad as Torrey said, then certainly the two of them were not in very good shape. Dan stopped beside the bone pile.

He was interested in that bone pile. Men had worked making it. They had gleaned bones from a considerable area and ricked them loosely. There was a great deal of bending involved in stacking a pile of bones like this. Whoever had done it, Shannon or the men in the canyon, had collected about five wagon loads. Perhaps more.

Dan paced about the pile, estimating its length and breadth as well as its height. At the end of the pile he stopped. He wished that he knew who had stacked these bones. If there were only some mark of identification—

The end of a rounded stick of wood projecting from the pile, caught Dan's eye. He bent down and pulled on the piece of wood. It didn't come out easily from the pile. Dan pulled. A big buffalo skull, the horns still in place, weather cracked and rough, slid out and the wood followed. Dan straightened up. In his hand was a wooden leg, a peg whittled out to take the place of a man's leg from the knee down. There was the U-shaped stirrup at the top. There was the worn and rounded end, and carved on the stirrup was a sprawling S.

"Pegleg," said Dan. And started back toward the camp.

Torrey met Dan as he came in. The Divide marshal's eyes were big and round as he looked at the piece of wood. He needed no words from Dan to tell him what it was. "So Shannon was here," said Torrey slowly. "I reckon now you'll feel different. I tol' you that Wirth was bad."

Dan nodded. "You did," he admitted. "Still this peg is no sign that Shannon's dead. Mebbe—"

"Mebbe hell!" Torrey snarled. "You know damn' well what happened. That peg puts all the dots over the I's. Shannon come in here an' him an' his Mexicans started collectin' bones. They got that pile built, then one of 'em scoutin' around, found gold. They forgot the bones an' started workin' washin' gold. Wirth an' his bunch come along an' dry gulched Shannon an' the Mexicans. They took over the outfit. They're washin' gold out of the claims. That's what happened an' you know it as well as I do!"

"It sort of looks that way," Dan admitted. "Still an' all—"

"An' you was the noble jasper that wouldn't lie up on a hill an' down them fello's!" Torrey flung the interruption at Dan. "Why you damn' fool! They're waitin' 'til tonight so they can take a whack at us. By God, Brethea, if you won't take a chance on 'em—"

"I'm goin' to find out what become of Shannon," vowed Dan, grimly. "I'm goin' to do that, Torrey, but I ain't goin' in for wholesale murder. I'm goin' to—"

"Yo're goin' to get killed, you damn' fool!" Again Torrey interrupted. "If you think I'm goin' to set here—"

Dan, his mind busy with the problem at hand but his eyes ever alert and watchful, flung a warning at Torrey. "Shut up! Here comes two of 'em."

Torrey ceased his ranting. Two men, riding side by side, were coming down from the canyon. One was the white eyed Utah Wirth. Torrey, at Dan's warning, flung one look toward the approaching riders and then walked over to his saddle and picked up his rifle. Dan, lounging easily, watched the men come in.

The two riders halted a little distance from the camp, dismounted, and came forward afoot. It was noticeable that as they approached they separated a little so that it would not be easy for one man to watch both of them. Perhaps fifteen feet from Dan Brethea they halted and the white eyed Wirth spoke.

"Howdy, men."

Dan returned the greeting. "Howdy."

Wirth hesitated. Apparently he didn't know exactly what to say. The man with Wirth, a swarthy, simian fellow with arms that were too long for his squat, barrel of a body, was not hampered by lack of words.

"You taken a ride today," he said, staring squarely at Dan. "We don't hanker to have anybody ridin' around our camp without comin' in."

"No?" said Dan, coolly. He was watching both as best he could. Now, in this predicament, he placed no confidence in Torrey.

"No!" snapped the squat man. "You

fellers pack up an' pull yore freight pronto! Pull out!"

Dan's lips were thin and tight, quirked up a little at the corners. He remembered what Torrey had said concerning Wirth's partner. "Yo're Dutch Selig, ain't you?" he asked casually.

"I'm Selig." The squat man's voice was harsh. "An' I say for yuh to git!"

"Did you tell Pegleg Shannon to get, too?" Dan's drawl was soft. "Or did yuh just bushwhack him without a warnin'?"

The softly drawled words brought an explosion of action. Wirth with a curse dropped a hand to his gun. Selig, too, snatched at his belted weapon and advanced a lunging step. Dan Brethea dissolved from lounging nonchalance to breathless action. In one fluid motion he had the heavy Colt out and cocked. The speed and certainty with which he handled his weapon, were almost miraculous. Once, in Cripple Creek, a man had said of Dan Brethea that he "drawed like greased oil." Certainly he now stopped Selig and Wirth in their tracks.

"Called the turn, didn't I?" drawled Dan. "Get together, you two. Bunch where I can see yuh both, or cut loose yore wolf!"

Selig, very slowly dropped his half drawn gun back into its holster and moved a shuffling step toward Wirth. Wirth remained poised, his hand still on his gun. Dan scanned the light eyed man coldly. Wirth was hard and a bad one, but Dan was harder and a better man than Wirth. Under that coldly calculating stare Wirth relinquished the hold on his weapon and dropped his hand to his side. He knew what he was up against, did Utah Wirth.

"That's better," commented Dan, his grin mirthless. "Now I want to know what happened to Shannon. Yuh killed him, didn't yuh?"

Selig snarled a curse. He was not so hard as Wirth, not so tough fibered. Dan took the curse for an answer.

"You got Shannon's outfit," he recounted coldly, "you got his claim, an' I reckon his bones have been cleaned by the coyotes an' put in that pile."

Selig started slightly and Dan knew that his guess was correct.

"I'm takin' you in," he said abruptly. "Jackling staked Shannon. I reckon he'll want to see Shannon's killers. Torrey, you move around an' come up behind 'em an' take them guns!"

At the command he heard Torrey move behind him. The Divide marshal had remained quiet, held motionless by the rapidity of events. Dan heard Torrey move and it seemed to him that Torrey was coming in too close. He dared not move his eyes from the men he held at the point of his gun barrel. He snapped a warning.

"Go 'round behind 'em, Torrey!"

Selig's eyes lighted suddenly. Wirth's face was wooden. Dan, warned by the light in Selig's eyes, stepped to his left and as he moved something crashed against his head and a red light shot before his eyes. He started to fall forward, half caught himself, then with another blow flailing against his head, staggered and pitched down on his face, completely out. Above him stood Able Torrey, snarling triumph on his face, and his rifle gripped in both hands.

"Kill me, will yuh?" snarled Torrey. "By God, I'll kill *you!*"

Dan Brethea returned to consciousness very slowly. Only the padding felt of his hat had saved him a fractured skull, for Torrey had swung viciously. As he came back to the possession of his faculties his head flaming with pain, he heard voices. They were loud but indistinct through the pain. Dan's natural reaction at first was to try to sit up. He couldn't. He was too weak and the effort hurt his head. He tried to prop himself with one hand but that, too, failed for his hands were bound behind him. When he tried to move his legs he found that they, too, were tied. He lay still, fighting against the blackness with all his will power and trying to overcome the aching ringing of his head.

Lying quietly, the pain shooting through

Knives Of Greed May Betray Him Who Believes That Dead Men Tell No Tales Of Plunder

his head, he tried to think. He was unable to concentrate. He heard the voices, and then something thudded against his ribs sending pain shooting through them. The sharp ache in his side partially cleared his head. He kept his eyes closed and fought out of the darkness that threatened to engulf him.

Now the voices meant something. He could understand what was being said, and as he caught the words, the pain in his side and head was thrust back. Dan Brethea's iron will surmounted the obstacles of his body. He listened. Able Torrey was talking.

"He jumped me when I wasn't lookin'," Torrey was saying, and it seemed to Dan that he was standing directly over him. "He beat the hell out of me, too. I reckon he wanted the little slut hisse'f, damn him, but I'm even with him now!" Once more came the blow and the piercing pain in Dan's side. Torrey had kicked him again.

Another, a soft voice with the indefinable, sibilant accent of the Mexican speaking English, carried to Dan. "You are even, Able," came the voice. "After awhile I weel help you weeth heem. We know some treeks, que no, Able?"

"Yo're damn' right we know 'em, Matias," Torrey's voice snarled. "I got just enough Injun in me to try 'em, too. I want to hear him squawl!"

The Mexican laughed softly. Another rasping voice, Wirth's, was interjected. "That's all right," grated Wirth. "I ain't sayin' what yo're to do with him, but I don't like it about that girl, I don't."

"What do you mean, Utah?" That was Selig talking, Dan could tell. "What don't yuh like?"

"I don't like her headin' into Divide," rasped Wirth. "You say you an' this feller was sent out by Jackling, Torrey?"

"Yeah," Torrey answered the question.

"Then what's to stop that girl from talkin' to Jackling?" Wirth pursued his reasoning. "If she gits in to Divide an' talks, Jackling will know you fello's got here. Mebbe he'll send somebody else. I don't like it."

"She ain't so damn far off," Selig had caught his partner's idea. "Travelin' with steers she ain't far in a day. Why don't you an' me go out an' git her, Utah?"

"It mightn't be a bad idee," Utah Wirth spoke slowly. "Yuh say she's a kind of pretty little piece, Torrey?"

"Damn' right." Torrey spoke with unction.

"We'll git her!" Utah decided suddenly. "Come on, Dutch. You an' me'll ride. Matias, we'll leave you an' Torrey here. You can do what you please with that jasper." There were sounds of men moving.

THE DEVIL'S KNIFE

Dan became aware of the fact that he was alone. He opened his eyes.

He was inside one of the little rock walled dugouts he had seen that morning. He could see the irregularly laid rock of the front wall and the door with light filtering through. The light was not strong. Dan judged that it was afternoon, probably late afternoon.

There was no one in the room. He could hear the voices of the men outside. Dan pulled at the binding of his hands but it was tight and fast. His feet, too, were tightly tied. He was still weak and giddy from the blows on his head. There was nothing to do, nothing he could do. He would simply have to wait. There might be a break. No use wearing himself out fighting against ropes. Lie quiet, rest and gain strength.

Dan relaxed and closed his eyes. For some time he lay there, then presently he heard footsteps. Men entered the dugout and Dan recognized the voices of the man Matias and Torrey. Evidently Utah Wirth and Dutch Selig had gone on their errand.

"Eet is a damn' good theeng I know you, Able," Matias was saying. "Theese Dutch an' Utah are tough hombres. They keel you lak that!" There was a sharp snap of fingers.

"After me hittin' Brethea on the head?" Torrey's voice was incredulous. "Why hell, Matias, he had throwed down on 'em. I tell you, if they'd of moved he'd of killed 'em."

"They shoot jus' the same!" Matias snapped the words.

"Well by gosh!" Torrey was genuinely surprised. "I knowed they was tough but—"

"You should see weeth Shannon," Matias interrupted. "They lie out on the hill. Shannon comes out an' Bang! Bang! like that. Shannon an' those three that were weeth heem!"

"Huh," Torrey grunted.

Matias pursued his subject calmly. "I theenk they mean to keel me," he said casually. "I theenk they weel."

"The hell!" Torrey exploded.

"Siguro. Me, I don' want to be keel."

"Listen, Matias," Torrey was very much in earnest, "why don't you an' me—"

"Si," Matias interrupted. "I theenk of that. That ees why I come een weeth the rifle wen you 'ave hit these Brethea. I need a compadre, me."

"I'm with yuh, Matias." Torrey lowered his voice a little.

Dan, even with his eyes closed could almost see him. Torrey would be leaning forward and talking confidentially. "Listen," the Divide renegade went on, "we'll stand on each side of the door. When they come in with the girl we'll let 'em have it. How's that?"

"Suppose they don't come in?" Matias questioned. "Suppose—?"

"Listen," Torrey amplified his plan. "We'll make 'em come in. We can save Brethea until we hear 'em comin'. We'll have him in shape an' I reckon he'll yell. That'll fetch 'em runnin'. How about that?"

The Mexican apparently was not sure. He made no answer.

Torrey went on. "They'll want to see it," he said. "They'll want to see what we're doin' to him. One of 'em will come anyhow. You ain't forgot how to use a knife, have you, Matias?"

"No Villareal ever forget the knife," Matias' voice was sibilant. "I theenk mebbe that work, Able."

"Sure it'll work. We can take 'em one at a time. We'll have the gold an' the girl, too, and I'll be even with that—" Dan knew that the word Torrey applied was meant for him.

He heard the men move. Torrey, it must be Torrey, Dan thought, came over and kicked him viciously. Dan held himself motionless.

"The damn' skunk's still out," growled Torrey.

"Have a dreenk, Able," Villareal invited. "Let the cabrone go."

Torrey walked away. Dan heard a bottle clink. He would have given a great deal for a drink just then. He heard the men move again, heard the door slam shut. Again he risked opening his eyes. He was in the dusk. Torrey and Villareal had gone out. Dan took a tentative pull at his bonds. They were as tight as ever.

For a long time Dan Brethea lay flat on his back. He could almost feel his muscles stiffen. His only consolation was that his head cleared while he lay quiet. He kept his eyes open, turning his head occasionally, and the walls and scanty furnishings of the little dugout were fixed in his mind. This dugout was evidently not the one used by Wirth, Selig and Villareal. It showed no signs of occupancy. Probably it had been built by Shannon and his men to serve as housing for the Mexican laborers that Shannon had with him. So Dan explained it to himself.

Dan could not account for his having been left alone, except that Torrey had suggested that Dan's torture be postponed until Selig and Wirth returned. Torrey and Villareal were probably in the other dugout and no doubt but that they had liquor. Dan wondered how long he would be let alone, how long he would lie on his back with his muscles growing stiffer and stiffer. He wished heartily that he had forced the issue with Torrey and killed the renegade. That idea was uppermost in his mind: To kill Torrey. These others he did not consider as he considered Torrey. They were bad, they had killed Shannon, they dealt in murder and robbery, but somehow they did not fit into the little seventh hell that Dan reserved in his mind for Able Torrey.

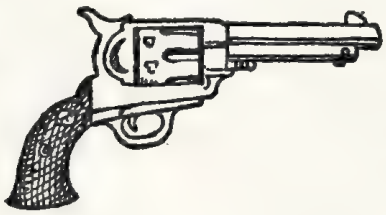
Torrey would die, Dan was resolved on that. There would be a chance of some kind, a break somewhere, that would enable him to get Torrey. So that he might be

ready when that break came, he moved about, rolling on his belly and flexing his bound arms and legs up behind him. He had been tied by a master hand and there was no relieving the tension of his bonds which bit into his wrists and ankles.

So the time passed, the half dusk of the dugout deepening into night, and Dan, alert and only a dull, recurring pain in his head, made ready as best he could for the time when he would have his chance.

It seemed to Dan Brethea that he had been in the dugout for years, although it must have been only a question of hours and minutes, when he heard Torrey and Villareal returning. The men's walk was uncertain and when they entered the dugout and bent down over Dan Brethea, their whisky laden breath gave him the reason for their faltering footsteps. Dan had rolled on his back when he heard their approach, and lay limp with his eyes closed. He held himself ready for any eventuality and shammed unconsciousness.

Torrey, kicking Dan in his already punished ribs, gave the reason for the return. "Might's well get him now," Torrey said a litle thickly. "Them fello's ain't comin' back, Matias. Le's get to work on this—"



"Si," Matias Villareal, too, spoke thickly. "W'at we do to heem firs', Able?"

"Strip him off," Torrey told him, "then we'll try yore knife on him, huh, Matias? That'll make him squeal plenty."

"A leetle at a time," agreed Villareal. "We take the skeen off hees ches', an' then off the bottom of his foots. We do that firs'."

Torrey grunted his agreement and kicked Dan again. "Hell!" he grated, disappointment showing in his words, "he's still out. I must of hit him a hell of a lick."

"Si. He weel know w'en we take off the hide though. You like to hear heem yell, Able?"

Before Torrey could reply, a knife, thin and sharp, pricked Dan in the abdomen. "So," gloated Villareal, "I poosh jus' a leetle an' then rrrrip! No, Able?"

"Hell!" Able Torrey snarled the word. "Quit that, Matias. I want him to know what's happenin' to him." Torrey was busily engaged with the lashing on Dan's feet. Dan could feel them loosen.

"Untie his arms," growled Torrey. "We got to get his clothes off for what I want to do."

Dan was jerked over on his belly. He let all his muscles go lax and the men handled him as they might a sack of meal. The thongs on his wrists were loosened and pulled away and Torrey and Villareal began the process of stripping him.

Still Dan Brethea waited. The time was not yet. Presently Villareal would step away and when that time came Dan would try for Able Torrey. He opened his eyelids a flickering crack, taking that chance so that he might locate Torrey definitely.

There was a little light in the dugout. It flickered and wavered and Dan knew that the men had brought a candle with them. Villareal was at his head; Dan could see the man's feet. Torrey, then was at Dan's feet. Dan was almost naked. The men had pulled off his buckskin shirt and breeches, and Torrey had yanked off his boots. That didn't matter to Dan. His whole being was concentrated on the opportunity he knew would come. *Must* come!

Torrey took a step from Dan's feet and caught his drawers, jerking them free. He peeled them down while Villareal, spitting profanity, pulled off the undershirt. Dan was stark naked.

"Now tie his han's, Matias," commanded Torrey. "We'll roll him over an' start on him!"

The break hadn't come! It had to be now. Dan tensed, ready to roll and come up. If a break wouldn't come he'd make one. Even as he tensed, from beyond the dugout came a hail.

As one, Villareal and Torrey straightened from Dan's body.

"Utah!" hissed Villareal.

"They're back," Torrey growled the

words. "Call 'em, Matias. Remember what we got to do!"

"Theese Brethea—" began Villareal.

"To hell with him. He's clean out. Git 'em in here, Matias!"

Both Torrey and the Mexican were sober now. The drink had left them with the coming of the grim business at hand. Dan felt a cold blast of air as the door was opened, and then he heard Villareal's shout: "*Aqui,* Utah. *Viene aqui!*"

Villareal was at the door. Torrey must be flanking its other side. Dan, hands and feet free, stark naked, rolled gently on his side. He saw Torrey, gun in hand, and a thin, swarthy man that was Villareal, with a knife glittering, flanking the doorway. There was a candle guttering its life away, set on a rock that projected from the wall. Villareal and Torrey were bent forward, trying to peer out the door and still not be seen. From outside came Utah Wirth's voice.

"We got her. What the hell's the matter with you fello's? Why don' yuh come out?"

Torrey's low voice carried to Dan. "I'll go out an' come in behind 'em. Watch yorese'f!"

Villareal nodded. Torrey stepped out the door and Dan Brethea came to his knees. Something warned Matias Villareal. He half turned and then a naked fury hit him, sent him reeling back against the wall, and Dan Brethea was through the door!

Instantly, having cleared the door, Dan dodged to one side. He heard Villareal's shrill yell and from the dark a shot crashed, the bullet smacking into the air somewhere near him. Dan's stiffened muscles could not handle his weight as easily as was their wont. He stumbled, regained his feet and rounded the corner of the dugout and at a staggering run went up the hill. Behind him he heard yells and confusion.

A short distance up the hill Dan fell, tripping over a rock. He heard a girl scream and knew that Wirth and Selig had accomplished their mission. Dan crawled ahead, skinning his naked knees on rocks and thorny growth. His face struck a tangle of branches and he knew that he had encountered one of the little cedars or pinions that dotted the side hill. He crawled further into the harsh growth, disregarding scratches to face and body. His hand fell on a jagged stone and he clutched it with his fingers. It was a weapon of sorts.

Lying there under the cedar, the cold earth pressed against his body, he considered his next move. What was it to be? He was weaponless and defenseless. The darkness aided him but it was his only ally. A seething rage burned in him against these men below. Somehow, *somehow* he must free the girl, Kitty Land. Somehow he must bring his reckoning to Able Torrey. These things must be done. But how? Apparently it was hopeless and yet Dan Brethea, jaws grimly clenched, was not hopeless. He lay flat under the cedar, trying to plan, and flexing the muscles that had almost betrayed him.

Down below, things were getting organized. Dan pinned his hopes on that. If the men, Wirth and Selig and Torrey, would only try to search for him there was still a chance. No. Better than that! *He* would search for them! He was free; it was night. There was a chance! Dan Brethea clutched the jagged rock in his hand and slipped out from under the cedar. Sheer madness this, a naked man, weaponless and alone, a man giddy from heavy blows on his head, a man weak with hunger and thirst, setting out to stalk four well armed, desperate ruffians. And yet—Dan Brethea stood up and moved wraithlike, down the hill, and as he moved a spark kindled near the dugouts below him, grew until it flickered brightly. Someone there had kindled a fire.

The fire was not overly large when Dan Brethea returned to the corner of the dugout that he had so recently left. All four of the men were about the growing blaze and from the tone of their voices and their gesticulations, all four were angry. Dan could not hear what they said but he knew that both Wirth and Selig were berating Villareal and Torrey. Of the girl, Kitty Land, he saw nothing. She must be in one of the dugouts, Dan surmised. Which one Dan did not know and it would be fool-

hardy to try to find out. He was sure the men were mostly concerned with him now, anyway. The thing that Dan Brethea had to do at the moment was to try to lure one or all of those men away from the fire. If he had possessed a rifle or a Colt he would have stood there in the shadow of the dugout corner and picked those four off as calmly as though shooting at tin cans, but he had neither the rifle nor the short gun. All he had was a big, jagged rock.

It occurred to him to throw the rock, but he decided against it. Not that there were not plenty of rocks—his feet told him that he was standing on several, and all of them sharp—but to throw the rock would simply be to betray his position to four desperate men. That would be foolish. There must be some better, some easier way. Dan struggled to find it and arrived exactly nowhere. He knew that he could leave, could run away, but that would not help him particularly. If he ran away he could travel until daylight. When dawn broke those men would trail him and shoot him down as coolly as they would shoot a deer. As long as they stayed together Dan was helpless and he knew it.

The men by the fire still arguing angrily, were not entirely engrossed by their argument. They were not just standing quarreling, their attention fixed on each other, but were looking out into the night. Selig, of the simian arms, had a rifle in his hands and Dan could see his own heavy belt of weapons strapped about Torrey's waist.

An idea struck Dan. A thing that was worth a trial. He bent down, picked up one of the stones beneath his feet, and with a high overhand throw, sent it up the hill, above the dugout. The stone fell with a clatter. Instantly the men by the fire were alert, their faces turned in the direction of the sound. Dan waited for a time and then looped the other stone in the same direction, throwing with more effort. Again the stone fell and this time, fortune favoring him, the falling stone started a little slide. Dirt and rocks rattled down and some larger stone fell with a thud. Torrey started away from the fire in the direction of the sound. He yelled back words over his shoulder as he ran,

"It's him! He's fell."

Torrey's run was the start. Selig, clutching the rifle, Wirth, pistol in hand, and Villareal, his knife glinting ruby bright in the firelight, started after Torrey. They ran out of the firelight and toward the hillside. Dan did not follow. Instead, forcing himself, he leaped from the shadowy corner of the dugout and made for the fire. He reached it before he was discovered and sent the blazing brands flying with bare, kicking feet. The fire scattered and dying, he ran back toward the dugout. On the hill there were startled shouts. Dan had accomplished his object. In the dark, men, even naked, weaponless men if they are desperate enough, are equal.

And Dan Brethea was desperate enough. The sudden run and the activity at the fire had set his head throbbing again, a dull pain that was like the glow of heated iron. He was weak with his long fast but there was in him that hidden reserve of energy that had pulled him through before, that sort of hidden reserve that had helped the plainsman from time immemorial. He could hear Wirth and Selig and Torrey and Villareal stumbling in the dark on the hillside above the dugout; could hear their excited voices raised in profanity and mutual recrimination. Down on the little flat in front of the dugouts the scattered embers of the fire glowed dully. The night was clear but there was no light save from the stars. Dan hugged the earth and noiseless and dangerous as a snake, started up the hillside toward the voices.

DEATH IN THE NIGHT

The men above had separated. Armed as they were, angry both with Dan and with each other, they had begun a combing of the hillside. Crawling on hands and knees, now lying flat to slide forward, now pausing to listen, Dan worked his way ahead and ever he kept his eyes on the skyline. Pinions and cedars loomed black against the sky, silhouetted there. Rocks towered up, and as he moved cautiously past a cedar Dan saw, clear against the skyline, something that moved, a figure

foreign to the hill. Gingerly then, he crawled toward that moving figure which came on stealthily. It was Villareal, Dan knew. Of all the men on that dark hillside Villareal was perhaps the most dangerous. He made no sound as he approached, and Dan, too, silent and deadly, went toward him.

Before they met, Dan stopped. Villareal was coming at an angle down the hillside. Dan gathered his legs under him and waited. The man came on, passed a pinion, slipped on a loose rock, staggered, caught his balance, and in that instant Dan was up and had leaped.

One hand he flung at Villareal's throat, the other, his left hand, swept in a half circle, clamping the Mexican's arm to his side. The clawlike fingers of his right hand clutched at a corded neck, the thumb sinking deep into the throat. The two

Satan's Favorite Opens His Bag Of Six-Gun Tricks When He Meets Hombres Thirsty For Blood

went down, thudding against the earth. Rocks slid with a clatter, and further up the hill Dutch Selig's voice deep and rumbling, called:

"Matias!—Matias!"

Villareal tried to struggle. He fought to free his right hand armed with his knife, from that iron circle that pinioned it. For a moment his legs threshed and then were caught and entwined by Dan's legs. The men lay there, motionless save only that that terrible right hand gradually contracted, overcoming the resistance of the corded neck muscles, and that the iron band about Villareal's arm and ribs drew a little closer.

Villareal was tense, fighting hopelessly against the human constrictor that was slowly crushing out his life. Dan, too, was tense. Every muscle, every ounce of power was concentrated on this thing he was doing, this business of killing a man. The thumb sank deeper and deeper into the windpipe. The left arm clamped tighter and tighter. Dan's aching legs were unyielding as he held Villareal helpless; then suddenly the man under Dan went limp.

It was the work then of but an instant to whip that left arm free, to seize and snatch the knife from Villareal's relaxing fingers and thrust it in and up under the curve of the ribs. The body beneath Dan gave a convulsive shudder. That long blade had found the life. Dan freed his right hand and came up, knife ready and just in time. Rocks were rolling under approaching feet. A black body loomed beside Dan. The knife shot out in a ripping flash of steel and Dutch Selig, slashed along the side from hip to shoulder, screamed, half fell, and still screaming, staggered on down the hill.

Dan leaped after him. He almost caught Selig but the treacherous footing betrayed him and he crashed down on his face, sliding over rocks and gravel. Selig, more fortunate, kept his footing. Somewhere to the left Torrey and Wirth were running, calling out in consternation, and, further down the hill, Selig still screamed, hoarse with pain. Dan gathered himself and got up. He went back up the hill and stopped by the black blotch that was Villareal's body. Bending down Dan searched swiftly for weapons. He found nothing, only a warm, sticky fluid that oozed from under his hand. Down below, the other three had met. Shots rattled from a six shooter, Dan's gun in Torrey's trembling hand. The lead spatted into the hill, wild, far away. Methodically Dan set about stripping Villareal.

The man's clothing was too small for Dan. There was nothing that he could wear, nothing that would protect his bruised and bloody feet, nothing that would cover him and save his body from the sharp branches of the cedars. Dan twisted Villareal's shirt about his loins tying it into an improvised breechclout, and then, leaving the body, started on down the hill.

Still Dan did not stand and walk but stayed low. Even though he had used the skyline for his aid, he was resolved that those others would not. There was a mad lust in his brain. Forgotten now was the aching head, the battered feet. the

scratched body. There remained only a cold resolve and an insane desire to kill, to wipe these renegades from the earth. Knife in hand Dan Brethea went down the hill.

At the bottom of the slope he stopped. He could hear the voices of the three but they were muffled. He went toward the sound and found himself suddenly at a dugout, the one in which he had not been imprisoned. Torrey, Wirth, and the wounded Selig had sought shelter. With a shock Dan realized that Kitty Land must be inside that dugout. He paused, indecisive.

There were three men inside that dugout, three men and a girl. One of the men was wounded, how badly Dan did not know. He did know that they were all armed and he knew too that he held an advantage only as long as it was dark. If any of the three ventured out, if they separated, then the advantage was with Dan. If they stayed close and together, if they waited for daylight, they were safe. Knowing the manner of men that they were Dan knew that they would stay close. He prowled about the dugout, listening, seeking some plan, some scheme that he could use. Inside the dugout the voices were low and muffled. A feeble light came through the chinks of the loosely laid rock of the front wall.

Dan might, of course, attack the dugout, but with little likelihood of success. It would be impossible for him to destroy it and force the occupants into the open. He might try the door but he knew what disastrous consequences that would bring. There seemed to be no possible way of utilizing his freedom. Then he bethought himself of a plan. The embers of the fire that Torrey had kindled were still alive. Fire! That was it. The dugout itself would not burn but the door was of wood. If he built a fire against the door the flames and smoke might drive Wirth and Torrey and Selig into the open. It was worth a try. True, Kitty Land was in the dugout but she would have to take her chances. If Dan waited until morning he would be helpless and those others would have the whip hand with their rifles. In that event the girl faced death and worse. Dan started back toward the spot where the fire had burned. He would find a glowing ember, nurse it to life and then seek fuel for his own fire.

He crossed the open space before the dugouts, seeking to find some remnant of the fire. He went too far and, realizing that, turned back. As he turned he heard metal clink against stone. Instantly he dropped down, flat on the ground. The tiny sound was repeated. Dan wormed his way toward it. Selig, Torrey and Wirth were in the dugout. Villareal was surely dead. But—Cautiously Dan slid forward. His extended hand struck against flesh and a treble yell of terror shot up. Dan's ready knife stopped in mid thrust. The small leg in his grasp twisted free. From perhaps ten feet away came a bass roar.

"Bud!"

Dan knew that voice. All his muscles went suddenly limp.

"Bill Rice!" exclaimed Dan Brethea weakly.

Those two words stopped a determined charge out of the dark. Bill Rice had faced too many dangers, been in too many tights in his life to flee from another. Now he stopped short and asked a question.

"Who's that?"

"Brethea," Dan returned. "Dan Brethea. Bill, what the hell—?"

But Bill Rice was talking. "Damn yore heart!" he swore. "Yo're shore hard to find! I been trailin' you an' that Torrey"—Bill chose a choice epithet for Torrey—"ever since you left Divide. By gosh, I ketched you!"

"Trailin' us?" Dan could scarcely believe what he heard.

"A course," snorted Bill. "Torrey killed French. I aim to kill him. Where is he?"

Dan was brought back to the present by the question. "In the dugout," he answered. "Him an' Utah Wirth an' Dutch Selig."

"I know 'em both," snapped Bill. "They got this kid's sister, the whelps! I—"

"But how?" interrupted Dan. "How did you get here, Bill?"

"I come along after they'd took the gal," snarled Bill. "I said I was trailin' you, didn't I? Hell! I had to hunt over hell an' half of Colorado for the kid. He was—"

"I thought they'd killed the kid," said Dan. "Bill, we can't sit here an' talk. They got the girl in that dugout."

"Well?" said Bill Rice.

Briefly then, with short, sharp sentences, Dan told what had happened, what he had learned and what the situation was. Bill Rice listened. Now and then he swore, slow, deep chested oaths. When Dan had finished he asked a question.

"What should we do, Bill?"

Rice grunted. "Looks like we better go ahead like you'd planned," he said. "Listen here, Dan. I found this kid back at that wagon. He'd been out trying to git another deer with the pistol you'd left him. They'd stayed right there, tryin' to smoke the meat of that buck you'd killed. The kid seen them fellers come in an' he tried to git to his sister, but he hadn't made it. He was damn' near crazy. I tol' him I'd git his sister for him."

"How'd you know to come here?" Dan asked.

"Follered the tracks as long as we could see. I knowed about this place. I've killed many a buff in here."

Dan grunted. "You think that a fire against the door will smoke 'em out?" he asked.

"Might," replied Rice. "It's worth tryin'."

"Then let's make it," snapped Dan. "It won't stay dark forever."

During all this time Bud had stayed quiet. Now he asked a question timidly. "You think Sis is all right, Mister?"

"Sure she's all right," answered Bill Rice. "Now, kid, we'll put you in that other dugout an' then we'll go to work."

Taking the boy the two men progressed across the little flat. Light seeped through the chinks of the occupied dugout.

The other hut was dark and lifeless. Rice scouted it carefully, was satisfied as to its emptiness, and led the others in. In the dugout Dan found his clothing. He pulled on buckskin shirt and trousers and thrust his battered feet into the boots. They hurt abominably but he forced them on, knowing that if he did not his feet would be in even worse condition. While Dan dressed, the grizzled Bill Rice remained on watch.

The occupants of the other dugout, in the meantime, made no move. They had evidence that Dan Brethea was loose and desperate, evidence in the form of one missing member of their evil quartet and in Selig's wound. They stayed shut and secure within the dugout, sure that when morning came they could hunt Dan Brethea down like a mad dog.

The boy, Bud, had Torrey's heavy Colt and he gave it to Dan. The gun was loaded but there were no extra shells. Dan opened the loading gate of the gun and examined the cylinder with the end of his finger as he turned it. There were five shells in the cylinder. He thrust the weapon into his waist band and announced that he was ready.

Leaving Bud in the dugout, with orders to stay there and be quiet, the two, Dan Brethea and Bill Rice, slipped out and began their preparations. Rice had only his rifle and a skinning knife for weapons. Dan had Villareal's knife and the heavy pistol with five loads. Rice had matches so they did not bother to search for embers of the fire. While Rice watched, Dan collected wood. When he had an armload he carried it noiselessly to the corner of the occupied dugout and went back for more. He heaped up armload after armload, and when he had a pile Rice helped him place it at the door of the dugout.

While they tried to avoid noise in this work they were not absolutely successful. The men inside must have heard them, for when Dan carried the first armload of wood to the door, flame blazed suddenly from a chink in the front wall and a slug narrowly missed Dan's head.

Thereafter Dan and Rice were more cautious. They had one small heap of wood against the door. They needed more than that, so Rice broke wood at one corner of the dugout, making a great snapping and crackle while Dan cautiously placed another load before the door. The strategy was successful for shots were fired on Rice's side but none came from the front. Now, with the wood in position, Rice went to the door with his matches while Dan in his turn attempted to distract attention. He

was not successful for shots drove Rice away before he could ignite the pile. The two withdrew a short distance and went into consultation.

"We got to light a long stick an' shove it around the corner at that pile," announced Rice. "Somebody out in front lightin' matches is apt to git killed."

Dan agreed. "You light it," he directed. "I'll watch 'em."

Accordingly a long branch was sought and found, a somewhat difficult task owing to the gnarled and crooked nature of the cedar branches. Dan brought in the branches to find that Rice had found a pine knot and was shaving a fringe of splinters on it with his knife.

"This'll work better," Rice commented, completing his task. "Watch now."

He broke a match from his block of sulphur tipped sticks and after a trial or two, lit it. The flame caught at the pine shavings and they flared up. The men were crouched beside the dugout, on the bank which formed the side wall of the shelter. The pine knot rich with pitch, caught and burned furiously, and Dan taking it from Rice, carried it to the corner of the dugout and leaning around it, tossed his torch so that it fell on the pile of wood.

For a time nothing happened. The pine knot blazed but the cedar was slow to catch. Dan could hear the men inside the dugout moving about. Bill Rice had moved a short distance away and was covering the door of the dugout with his rifle. Dan waited.

The blazing torch burned through a branch and fell down into the pile. Now, nearer the bottom it had a better chance to do its work. The cedar caught, snapping and cracking, and flame, tiny at first but growing stronger, shot up against the door. Peering around the corner of the front wall Dan saw all this.

Smoke was now pouring from the cedar and causing consternation within the dugout. Dan heard Torrey's voice raised in oaths and the bitter profanity of Utah Wirth. Licking up against the dry pine boards of the door the fire caught at long dried knots. Pitch oozed from these and little spurts of fire shot out. From inside the dugout came a shout.

"Brethea!"

From the corner of the dugout Dan replied.

"Here. Go ahead."

"We got that girl in here, Brethea," it was Torrey shouting. "Pull that fire away from the door or by God you know what we'll do to her!"

Following Torrey's words there was silence for a moment, broken only by the crackling of the fire. Then there came a scream, high and shrill. There was mortal terror in the scream. Kitty Land!

At the sound of that voice Dan Brethea cast caution to the winds. Sanity, which had returned to him when he talked to Bill Rice, went piecemeal. Before the echo of that scream had died there was a raging madman outside the dugout. Heedless of Rice's warning yell Dan rounded the corner of the dugout and charged the door. The fire flew from about his legs as he leaped against the planking. Hot sparks shot into his face as his shoulder struck the door. Flame flared against his legs, but, where the flames had eaten at a knot, the center plank cracked. Dan leaped back and lead slugged at the doorway as he leaped.

Again he charged, wildly, blindly, insanely. Again he struck the door. The weakened center plank gave way, splintering. A wide plank it was but thin, too thin and eaten by fire. Again Dan reeled back. Too slowly this time for a shot from a ready gun had struck him. His whole left side was numb. From the darkness behind him came a roar and a heavy, five hundred and fifty grain slug propelled by one hundred and fifty grains of powder thudded into the door. Bill Rice was shooting with his big forty-five caliber Buffalo Sharps.

SIX-GUN SHOWDOWN

Dan gathered himself for a fresh charge. He had been struck high under the shoulder and blood oozed from the wound. The fire, scattered but still burning with all the fury of which dry cedar is capable, was shooting up against the door, catching at the now exposed bar, sending little flames from the splintered

end of the broken plank. Again the Buffalo Sharps roared and the bar, struck by the soft nosed slug, trembled and splintered. And now, once more, Dan Brethea hurled himself at the door.

Rice's high warning yell went up. Lead came hissing through the door. Dan leaped, shoulder first, struck the door full and as he struck was hit again. The right leg now.

Under the impact of his weight the weakened bar broke, the door slammed back and he pitched down the single step into the cabin. He caught a glimpse of a raised gun, of snarling exposed teeth in Torrey's bearded face, and then he was gripped with Torrey, whirling in a mad dance that was punctuated by a crash as the Sharps bellowed at the doorway. Dan had a distorted picture of Utah Wirth's face falling away from him, then he was whirled away. His right hand, holding Villareal's knife, pumped up and down, the knife sliding into flesh as though that flesh were butter. Torrey screamed into Dan's ear, screamed again, and then, suddenly, sagged away. Dan fell with him, still striking with the knife. He felt a firm hand catch at his shoulder and rolled clear of Torrey's body, the knife held swordlike, ready for a thrust. Bill Rice stood over him, his face clear in the light of the fire. Dan checked his thrust. The big Buffalo Sharps was in Rice's hand, and Bill Rice's voice carried through the fog that had settled on Dan's brain.

"He's dead," said Bill Rice. "Both of 'em. I got Utah through the door."

Dan crawled up from Torrey's body. His leg buckled and he caught himself with an outflung hand, seizing Rice's shoulder. Torrey lay, horribly dead, at Dan's feet. In the far corner of the dugout was Kitty Land, lying like a wet sack, limp and shapeless. Beside Kitty was Dutch Selig, stripped from the waist up except for a wide swath of crudely applied bandage. Selig's eyes were wide and his mouth was open. Almost at Selig's feet lay Utah Wirth on his face, the back of his head a bloody mess.

"You damned fool!" snapped Bill Rice. "You *damned* fool!"

He caught Dan about the waist and pulled him toward the door. Dan took a step and then resisted. "The girl—" he began, with some hesitation.

"I'll git her." Rice pulled again. "Come outen here!" Dan allowed himself to be pulled from the dugout. He tripped on the step and Rice carried him clear, sending the fire in the door flying with kicks. The crude casing of the door continued to burn as did the logs that supported the dirt roof. Indeed all the wood in the front of the dugout was now on fire. Rice got Dan outside, lowered him to the ground and then shielding his face with one arm, ran back into the fire. He returned with Kitty Land across his shoulder, laid her beside Dan and once more plunged into the dugout. When he emerged again he was hauling Dutch Selig. Selig's feet had barely cleared the door when the logs that supported the roof, burned through and, with a crash the dirt fell, sending sparks showering and effectually stopping the fire. Only one plank of the door, thrown clear, continued to burn, sending out a feeble flicker of firelight. Bill Rice, hauling Dutch Selig, stopped beside Dan. Dan had struggled up until he was sitting. In the fitful light from the burning plank Rice surveyed the sitting man, stood for a long, silent instant, looking down. Then he spoke very slowly.

"Crazy as hell," said Bill Rice, as though talking to himself. "Crazy as a damn coon."

Almost a month to the day from the date of the killing of French Lemoin a strange cavalcade struck the main street of Divide. There was first Dan Brethea, riding his big bay gelding and driving two scantily laden pack mules. Following Dan were two wagons, both pulled by oxen. On the seat of one canvas-topped wagon was

a girl. The other wagon was high sided and piled above the sides were buffalo bones.

A freckled faced, tow-headed kid with a long willow pole for a gad, strode proudly beside the wagons. Following the last wagon was Bill Rice, spare, short and erect, sitting his big horse grandly and with a heavy Buffalo Sharps across his saddle bows. The men were bearded and hairy, buckskin clad and the buckskin smoke and grease stained. The boy was clothed as were the men, and the girl's costume was an odd mixture of calico and leather. The steers, weary heads lowered, plodded through the dust of Divide's main street, and bustling, booming Divide watched them as they passed and then went on about its business.

At the long, low warehouse of Jackling and Boyle, the boy swung his teams to a halt beside the loading platform and cried, "Whoa!" The oxen stopped. Dan Brethea swung down from his saddle and Bill Rice also dismounted and stood, rifle resting on the ground, staring about with fierce, hawklike eyes. A clerk sauntered out on the platform and at a word from Dan Brethea hurried back into the warehouse. Presently Herbert Jackling appeared in the shadowed door and crossed to the wagons. He stopped on the edge of the platform, while in the doorway curious clerks and loiterers gathered to survey these arrivals. Dan Brethea stared up into Jackling's gray eyes and spoke.

"We're back, Mister Jackling," he announced needlessly. "There's what's left of yore outfit," and he gestured toward the bone laden wagon.

Jackling's face was impassive. If he felt emotion he did not show it. Dan, putting his hands on the edge of the platform, vaulted up so that he stood looking down at the shorter, older man. The girl was staring with frightened, fascinated eyes. Bud whistled noiselessly to show his nonchalance and Bill Rice moved hostilely toward a loiterer who rested a hand on the bone wagon and leaned against it. The loafer departed hurriedly and Dan Brethea spoke, low voiced to Jackling.

"Shannon was killed," he said. "We found his outfit. Torrey went bad on me an' I had to let him go. That's all that's left, Mister Jackling."

Jackling nodded and spoke for the first time. "Come into the office," he said.

Dan Brethea shook his head. "We got some things to unload first," he answered, and strode toward the canvas covered wagon. Bill Rice, with a last baleful glance at the loiterers, followed him. From the rear of that wagon the two brought a man, heavy, hairy, and with long arms lashed to his sides. Him they laid in the shadow of the warehouse. "Dutch Selig," Dan said to Jackling. "He'll take watchin'."

Jackling beckoned and a man came from the door of the warehouse. "Watch him!" ordered Jackling, gesturing toward the prone Selig. The clerk stepped to Selig's side.

Now, from the end of the wagon Brethea and Rice brought small buckskin sacks, heavy with the weight they held, and from the men in the doorway and the curious gathered about, there came a whisper, "Gold!"

The two men placed the sacks at the edge of the platform. Brethea helped the girl from the wagon seat and the boy, Bud, climbed up. Each taking a load, the party followed Jackling, who preceded them into the warehouse. In the office at the front of the building Jackling turned and gestured toward a bench and chairs. Bud and his sister sat down on the bench. Bill Rice took a chair gingerly, his rifle between his knees and his sacks at his feet. Dan Brethea remained standing. Jackling looked at Dan.

"Now," said the gray-eyed man.

Dan took a breath and then with brief sentences pared to their barest necessity of words, began his story. He told of meeting Kitty Land and her brother, of Torrey's attack on the girl, of the finding of the bone valley and of Pegleg Shannon's wooden leg in the bone pile. He told of Torrey's treachery, of the capture of Kitty Land by Wirth and Selig.

"They brought her back," continued Dan. "It kind of made a break for me. I got loose. Seemed like Bill had been trailin' Torrey an' me an' I run into him

about that time. There was a fight an' all them fello's except Selig got killed. Selig was hurt."

Jackling nodded. "I'll see that Selig is taken care of," he said tonelessly. "We built a jail here since you left, Brethea."

Jackling stepped to the office door, called, and spoke a few brief words to the man who answered. Then he returned to his desk. Dan knew without being told, that Dutch Selig had been disposed of, at least temporarily.

Jackling stared at Dan. "Well?" he said.

"There was a mine up above," said Dan. "A pretty good placer. We staked it, Bill an' Kitty an' Bud an' me. You own a sixth share in it, Mister Jackling."

"A sixth?" Jackling's eyebrows went up.

"Shannon had some kin back in Iowa," said Dan. "Bill knows 'em."

"A sister," corroborated Bill Rice.

"I see," said Jackling slowly. "And what do you plan to do now, Brethea?"

The weight of responsibility was heavy on Dan Brethea's young face. He glanced toward the two children, boy and girl, on the bench. Kitty Land looked at him, adoration in her eyes. Bud wriggled but he too looked with adoration. "Why," said Dan, "Bill wants to pick up an outfit an' a couple of men he can trust an' go back to the placer. I'm goin' back, too, but I got to get these kids started east to school, Mister Jackling."

A faint grin spread beneath Jackling's close clipped gray moustache. "I see," he said. "I think I can help you with that, Brethea. I make it a point to try to help my partners." There was a faint accent on the last word.

Silence in the office for a moment. Then Jackling spoke again. "You were on a holiday, I remember, when you undertook this job for me," he said.

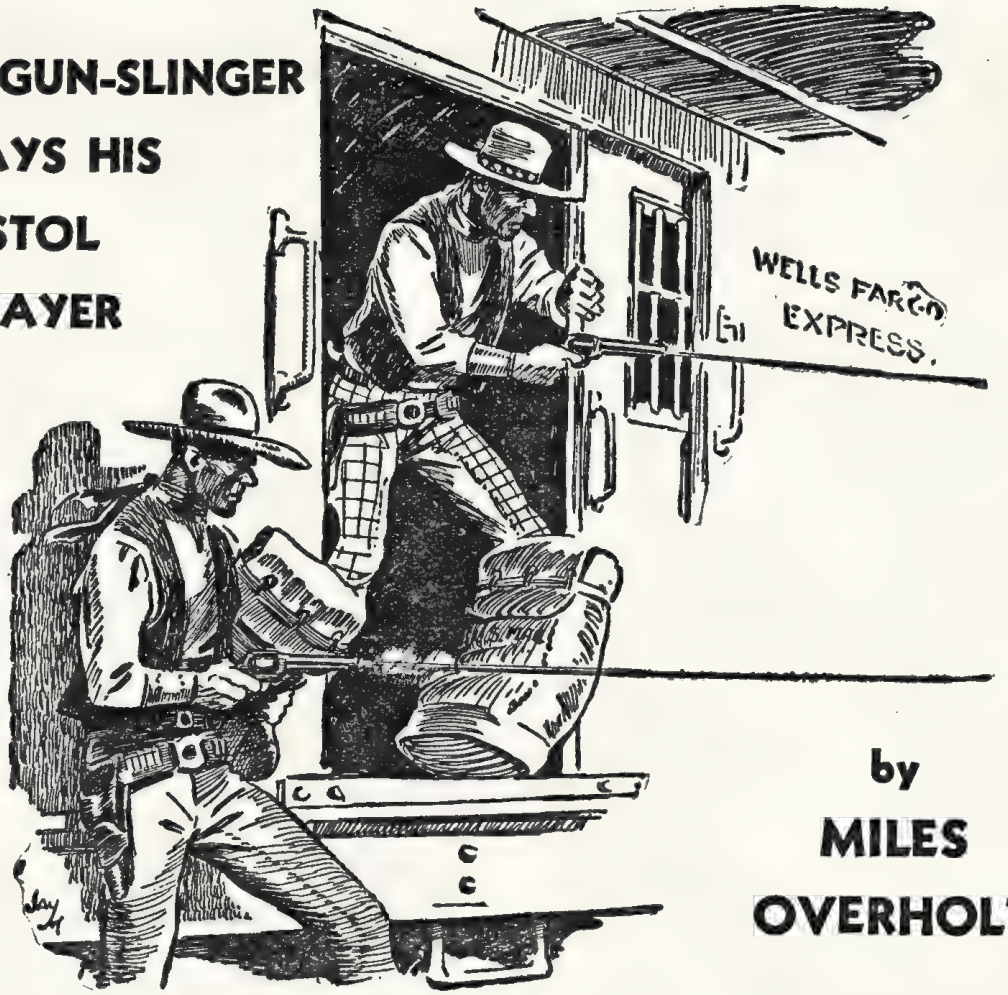
Dan nodded. Jackling reached into a drawer of the desk and pulled out a little sack that clinked musically. He held it out to Dan. "Here's the two hundred I owe you," Jackling announced. Dan took the sack, letting it dangle from his fingers. Jackling studied the group.

"We'll have to record those claims," he announced casually. "And it's customary to give a mine or a mining company a name. Have you any in mind?"

Dan Brethea shook his head, but Bill Rice, his eyes twinkling like the fierce yellow eyes of an eagle and his claw-like old hands clutching the heavy barrel of his Buffalo Sharps, answered the question.

"Sure," announced Bill Rice. "Pegleg started this when he went after them bones. Dan finished it when he brung the bones back. We'll call her the Bone Haul, Mister Jackling."

A GUN-SLINGER SAYS HIS PISTOL PRAYER



by MILES OVERHOLT

RETURN OF THE SIX-GUN GHOST

The holdup of the C. R. & S. W. passenger train had not been as simple as Cash Haynes and Ornery Hummel had figured it.

With Lefty Mayhew and Joe Gribble in charge of the engine crew, and Bull Martin and Newt Kelly handling the trainmen, Cash and Ornery had dynamited the express car.

But there was a shooting fool in that express car. That is, he had been there previous to the dynamiting. He had made an exit in some manner while the dynamite was being placed, and from the darkness he had cracked down on Bull Martin and had scored a bullseye. Martin would rob no more trains.

Ornery and Cash worked fast. They found the safe unlocked, and from it they extracted the $150,000 they knew would be there. They also found two tin boxes. These they took, together with the currency.

But when they stepped out of the express car, a bullet slogged into the right arm of Ornery Hummel, twisting him about but not knocking him out.

Someone up at the locomotive was firing with deadly precision. Joe Gribble went down with a shriek, rolled down into a ditch and lay still. It appeared there were at least six guns in action against the robbers.

As it happened, there were two deputy

sheriffs aboard the train, and they, together with a couple of cowhands and the express messengers, became real busy.

Two of the bandits were killed, one was wounded, and the train defenders apparently were all intact and going strong.

But the robbers had the cash they were after and the horses were only two hundred yards away. They made a run for it, shooting back as they fled. Newt Kelly sprawled, half way to the horses, and didn't get up. A bullet, sizzling high, struck Ornery Hummel in the head, ripped around under his scalp, and stuck. Ornery went down, got up dazedly almost on the instant and mounted his rearing horse.

The remaining robbers were all ahorse now and riding away. No more bullets rained around them. They were out of range and it was dark.

Ornery Hummel, cynical, vicious and cold-eyed, rode along in a daze. Cash Haynes, the leader, and Lefty Mayhew, both unhit, spurred toward the hideout in the Farralones. Ornery's pony kept right at their heels.

Haynes halted his horse at a creek.

"Here's where we divvy up," he said. "Then it's every gent for hisself."

Lefty Mayhew held matches while he counted out the money. There was $50,000 apiece, all in currency. Hardly knowing what he was doing, Ornery Hummel accepted his third, placed it in the tin box he carried, wrapped it in his slicker, and rode away as in a dream. He was unconscious, but nobody knew it, not even Ornery.

The other two outlaws sought different directions. Sometime in the future they would all get together again at the old hideout in the Farralones. Just now it was a matter of playing safe. With three of the band dead, the proceeds were, of course, doubled that which they had expected. They could live a long time in respectability on $50,000 apiece.

Ornery Hummel, nicknamed "Ornery" because he was just that, had no interest whatever in where he was going or what he was doing. Only one thought remained in his head—to get rid of that cash. That was the only rational idea remaining. Aside from that, his mind was a total blank. It was at if his subconcious mind hung onto that last small thought before finally sinking into a comatose condition.

So at daylight near a spring in a wide canyon, at least twenty miles distant from the scene of the train hold-up, and in the next county, the robber dismounted, thrust the tin box filled with the $50,000 into a crevice in a towering cliff above the spring, then once more mounted his weary pony.

At nightfall, old Seth Briggs, prospecting the hills at the base of the Upper Farralones, found the unconscious bandit. He had fallen from the saddle half a mile from Briggs' camp.

Somehow Briggs got him to his little cabin and there dug out the bullet which was lying just under the scalp, but which had seemingly dented the skull. The first bullet had gone entirely through the robber's arm.

Hummel lay in a stupor for two weeks while old Seth doctored him, watched over him and saved his life. Ornery opened his eyes to absolute consciousness on the fifteenth day and smiled at his savior.

"What's all the shootin' about?" he wondered, his voice husky. He was very, very weak.

"Hello, ol' timer," grinned old Seth. "Yuh been kinda under the weather for a spell."

"What's it all about?" Hummel wondered again. "Was I hurt?"

"Sho, don't yuh remember?"

"Not a thing," answered the bandit. "I have been trying to remember things for the last coupla hours. But I only draw a blank."

Old Seth had seen much violence during his seventy years on earth. He had ideas, too, about what a slight pressure on the brain will do. So he was quite ready to believe that his patient's mind might be a blank. It might straighten itself out of its own accord, given time, and then, again, it might create a new personality. And that is just what it did.

Hummel was up and about within another two weeks, but he remembered nothing about his past. He had no remembrance of how he got hurt, or why

He had not the slightest idea what his name was, or what he had done for a living.

But, most unusual of all, he was no longer the cynical, unmoral, hard-boiled outlaw, but a smiling, good-natured, harmless cowpoke, with a strange ambition to be friendly with everybody and everything.

Seth Briggs understood, in a measure, what had happened, and tried to help the stray waddy. Seth didn't care what the young man had been; he was not curious. He had not heard of the train robbery, for he had seen no one for six months, nor did he expect to see any human being for the next half year. He surmised, of course, that his patient had probably been riding the owl-hoot trail, but he didn't care about that, either.

From the young man's pockets Seth had taken a wallet containing $300 and from a money belt another $1,200. So he guessed that he was not an ordinary cowhand.

"'Pears to me, you gotta start all over agin, son," the old prospector said, one evening as they sat about a cheerful camp fire. "Shucks, I wouldn't lose no sleep worrying about the past. It didn't hardly ever mean anything anyway. You can't nowise do anything about it, whatever it is. So you gotta start in brand new."

"Yeh, I reckon you're right," admitted the young man. "Maybe the past wouldn't be so good to think about, anyway. Them two bullets kinda tell a story, but danged if I know what."

"Yeh. Might be a good thing it happened this way, at that," said Seth. "How yuh feel about things? What I mean—you got any ideas about what you'd like to do to earn a livin'? Would you like to earn yore money honest or take it away from them what already got it?"

"Why, that's easy," said the patient. "I don't want a cent that doesn't belong to me. And I'd want to earn it, too. I wonder," he broke off, "how I made a living up to now."

Old Seth hauled out the wallet and the money belt.

"Whatever you done for a livin', you shore done 'er well," he said, dryly. "There's fifteen hundred dollars."

"Gosh! Did I have that on me?" The young fellow was astonished. "I didn't know—but it don't seem natural to think I could have earned that much honest. Heck! I wish I could remember."

"Sho, I wouldn't try to figger it out. Maybe it'll come back to you some day. Meantime, yuh're about 26 or 27 year old, mebbe. You got a whole lifetime before yuh. Why not start in now and make somethin' of yoreself? It wouldn't surprise me none if'n you rode the owl-hoot trail plenty. But in that case, you might be glad things are as they are."

"I—I'm afraid that's how I got this money. Here"—and he tossed the belt and wallet over to the prospector—"you keep it. You saved my life, such as it is, and you are shore entitled to it."

But Seth wouldn't have it that way.

"Shucks, it wasn't nothin'," he said. "You jus' do them things, that's all, without no thought of reward. Say," he broke off then, "why don't you take this here stake an' locate yuh a little spread and start in bein' a regular citizen?"

"I never thought of it," admitted the young man. "But it shore seems like a swell idea. Only—tell you what. You ain't never goin' to get nowhere romancin' around these hills. Why not throw in with me and we'll both start us a spread together?"

Old Seth flashed a hungry look at his patient.

"Yuh know, son," he said, gently, "I kinda think you'd shore be a swell pardner. Tell you what—you locate the spread and go ahead and run 'er, figgerin' that some day I'll come along and mebbe camp with you. Right now I got one or two places I ain't prospected yet, but it won't be long till I'll be too danged old to climb these here hills. Then, son, I'd like to know there'd be some place where I could find a welcome to live out the rest of my days."

The stray waddy looked into the fire for a full minute before he spoke. Then he said:

"If there wasn't no other reason in the world for doin' it, that would be plenty excuse for startin' that spread—to be able

to kinda pay you back for what you done for me. It's a go," he said.

Old Seth Briggs had bought a new-fangled gold-finder. He had discovered that it was only another fake instrument, but it served one purpose. On it were the words: "Pat. Pending." The stray waddy picked up the instrument, and grinning, said:

"Look, there's my new name—Pat Pending."

The old prospector grinned.

"As good as any, and better'n most," he said. "All right, Pat, let's hit the hay."

"Pat Pending" found his spread next day. He rode out into the low hills, looking over the country, and along toward nightfall gazed off to the southwest. Spread out before his eyes was a wide valley, green and lush. Down its center a silvery stream, fifteen or twenty feet wide. There appeared to be no human habitation within a radius of forty miles. He spurred his mustang down into the valley.

Pat Pending located a half section of land, filed his papers at the county seat, which was Playa del Rey, a cowtown of perhaps 1500 population, and proceeded to build a spread in that little valley. He recorded a brand PB, and soon had a cabin, corrals and fences under construction He bought some calves from one of the ranchers to the north, and worked fourteen to twenty hours a day. And was happy every minute.

Old Seth Briggs went on his way, promising to come "home" when he became too old or too tired, and by degrees the PB grew into a promising cattle outfit. Within three years, Pat Pending was well and favorably known throughout Lee county, and he prospered with the years.

Pat Pending had shipped a hundred steers and had received top prices. It was the first real money he had realized out of his new spread, and he was jubilant. He deposited the money in the bank at Playa del Rey and then went down to the Oasis for a mild celebration. He never had learned to drink very much under his new personality, and he had remembered nothing of his past. But this sale called for something. So he bought a drink and stood there toying with his glass for a few minutes, wishing old Seth would come tromping in so they could have a real party.

Someone edged up to his shoulder and spoke in a low tone.

"How are you, Ornery," said the voice. "Long time no see."

But Pat, not suspecting that he was being addressed, did not turn his head. The man at his right nudged him gently.

"Don't yuh remember me, feller?"

Pat turned half around.

The man, black-bearded, leering and dirty, was a complete stranger to him.

"I'm afraid not," said Pat. "Am I supposed to remember you?"

"I getcha," smirked the bewhiskered man. "You're somebody else here, huh? Jake with me. Where kin I see yuh in private?"

Pat was pondering. Evidently his past had at last caught up with him, and it didn't look good. Not if this fellow was a part of it. He felt an immediate resentment against the stranger, but knew that he would have to be wary.

"I got a room over at the Palace Hotel," he said. "Number 16. I expect to be there in twenty minutes."

"O. K.," grunted the stranger. "I'll see you then."

Pat Pending was bothered. He hated to have to see this man, but there might be something in his past life that would prove ruinous unless he had knowledge of it, so he decided to let the uncouth stranger do some talking. And the stranger talked.

He was two-thirds drunk when he came lumbering up the stairs, and Pat was already sorry he had told him where he could be found. But it was too late now. The stranger walked in without knocking and took the only chair in the little room.

"Bin wonderin' whar you went," said Cash Haines. "Me'n Lefty Mayhew got to-

gether coupla months ago an' picked up four other boys, which you'll like, an' we're gettin' all set t' go into business agin. Shore glad we found you."

"And just who do you think I am?" asked Pat, softly.

"Aw, quit yer kiddin', Ornery," leered Cash. "You can't fool me for a minute. Shucks, I'd know you anywheres. So would Lefty. He's around somewheres. Hell, feller, we played around together for two years, you know, an' you get t' know a feller purty well in that time."

"What do we do?" asked Pat.

"Aw, can that stuff," snarled Cash Haynes. "I done tol' you I knowed you right off. You ain't gettin' nowheres thataway. Lissen, feller, they's a thousand dollars reeward on yore scalp, jus' th' same as they is on Lefty's and mine."

"For doin' what?" asked Pat.

"Aw, you know—that train job. By th' way, how long did yore share last? Me'n Lefty spent ours on the races an' one thing an' another in Mexico, but me, I shore spread her far and wide. Lefty did, too, from what he tells me."

By adroit questioning, Pat Pending learned all about himself that evening, and it didn't set well with him. He heard himself called a killer and a train robber, a rustler and a gunman. And he believed it all. He had to. Cash Haynes was not lying, Pat could see that. His heart was heavy and his future looked mighty black.

Unfortunately, he had told Cash about his ranch and his prospects, and Cash Haynes was quick to grasp at the opportunity afforded to make a killing.

"Hell! She's made t' order!" he exulted. "I know your spread. Us boys has been rummagin' around among them hills an' we located your ranch a coupla weeks ago. By golly, we even talked it over. We said if'n we could get hold of that valley, we'd have th' world by th' tail. She is the one straight outlet into Mexico, an' what a sweet trail she is."

"Why—what do you mean?"

"Look, Ornery. I got a feller down in El Encinto, 'bout thutty miles acrost th' Line which'll take all th' wet stuff we can drive down. Hell! It's jus' like findin' money, you havin' that spread whar it is. I see now what you done with your dinero. Purty slick, if'n you ask me. It's what me'n Lefty should oughta done. But we didn't an' you did, so she's O. K., anyway."

"Oh, no, it isn't," said Pat. "Maybe I was all you say I was—a thief an' a gunman and what-not, but I'm a new man now an' I'm stayin' that way, mister."

"Oh, yeah? With from ten t' twenty years, mebbe more, starin' you in th' face th' minute me'n Lefty tell a sheriff. Guess agin, feller."

Pat Pending rode back to his ranch in a daze next morning. He did not see any way out—not at the moment, anyway. Before he left town, he had heard Cash Haynes and Lefty Mayhew tell him that they'd be out within a day or two, and he'd have to make the best of it. He had thought of going to the sheriff, but was fearful lest he be involved as deeply as the others, and there were six of them in Haynes' band now.

For a while he had a notion to draw his money from the bank and flee, and would have done so, except for one thing—there was old Seth Briggs somewhere in the mountains, depending upon him to keep the home fires burning against the time he was ready to retire and settle down on a bench in the sunshine of the PB ranch. He couldn't throw down old Seth.

Pat wondered if he really had been a gunman. Cash Haynes had told him that he had the smoothest, the flashiest draw in all the southwest. He hadn't known it. He knew that he was an excellent shot with a pistol but he never had had occasion to do any fast gun work recently. Certainly he had no desire to shoot anyone.

So it was a gloomy host who met Cash Haynes, Lefty Mayhew and their four cold-eyed companions less than a week later. They moved in bag and baggage and seemingly defied Pat to refuse them welcome.

Cash and Lefty moved into the main cabin with Pat. The four others took over the bunkhouse. Pat had no hired help now since the Fall roundup was over. Most of his cattle were either in one of the pas-

tures or ranged nearby and there was little to do on the ranch though he himself kept busy all day long.

The six outlaws loafed about the ranch for a month. Then one morning Cash proposed that they start their rustling.

"We been loafin' long enough," he leered at Pat. "I rid down t' El Encinto last week an' saw Escarnacion Trujillo, an' he wants two-three hundred haid of stock. I tol' him we'd have 'em thar in ten days, so tonight we get started."

"Where you goin' to get your herd?" wondered Pat.

"Wal, for a starter, I figured we'd drive them PB steers down thar," said Haynes, grinning on all his yellow teeth. "They're already t' go, an' it'll give us some cash t' work on."

"You mean—my steers?" Pat Pending gasped.

"Our'n, feller, our'n," said Haynes. "Hell, ain't we all pardners?"

"We are not. Think I'd rustle my own stuff? It's your turn to guess again," snarled the PB owner.

"Yeah? Wal, you ain't tellin' us nothin', *hombre,*" snarled Haynes right back at Pat. "You can't pull that goin' straight stuff on us boys. Look! We sell them critters t' Trujillo an' get us a workin' stake—see? Then we begin whittlin' off hunks o' cattle from these here ranchers up north, mebbe fifty or less at a time. Hell! You'll get paid for them steer twenty times over. Only thing is, we ain't got time t' rustle enough to satisfy Trujillo in th' next three-four days. We gotta keep him happy, savvy, or he won't depend on us. P'int is, we got to establish ourselves with him, then we got a regular market."

"Look here, Haynes," snapped Pat. "You're not goin' to steal my steers an' you're not goin' to use this ranch as a hide-out. I'm livin' straight, I tell you. I wish you'd go on away an' leave me alone. Can't you give a feller a chance?"

"You whinin'?" leered Haynes.

"No. Just tellin' yuh gentle-like. I can get rough if I have to." And for the first time within three years the eyes of Pat Pending narrowed like those of a killer, and he went into a crouch.

Cash Haynes laughed. He laughed louder when he saw four guns pointing at Pat Pending.

"Good, boys!" commented the bandit chieftain. "Take his gun an' tie him up in th' house. We're takin' th' cattle tonight."

Though he tried it, Pat couldn't fight six men, and shortly he was securely tied up and tossed on his bunk in the main cabin. Then the outlaws rode away after the herd.

"Mebbe you can ontie yourself in six-seven hours," said Haynes, as they rode away. "But it won't do you no good. We're takin' your gun."

Pat did manage to get out of his bonds by midnight, but, as Haynes had said, it did him no good. He might conceivably have followed the stolen herd, but he had no gun and, even if he had, they were six to one. Also they were killers and they wanted his ranch—the ranch which he had to hold onto because he had promised Seth Briggs it would be his home when he was ready to retire.

For a few days Pat Pending was slightly buoyed up by the hope that, with the proceeds of the stolen herd, Haynes and his men might go away and leave him. Yet he knew it was foolish to hope for that. This was too soft a spot for them.

They did remain away for three weeks, and Pat was almost hopeful again, when they came riding back—that is, four of them came back. Cash Haynes explained.

"Hunk an' Jeff got theirselves messed up," he told Pat. "Played with th' wrong greaser gals in El Encinto. Knifed."

Haynes said nothing to Pat about the money received for the herd of PB steers, other than that they brought a good price, considering the bargaining proclivities of Escarnacion Trujillo. But the outlaw didn't offer Pat his share of the profits.

"We gotta get another herd together

A Six-Gun Ghost Leaps Out Of Hell; And A New Grave Is Dug To The Tune Of A Bullet Dirge

pronto," Haynes said next day. "Trujillo wants fifty haid a week. Hell of a good deal, too. He's got him a contract sellin' beef t' a minin' company down thar, an' he's agreed t' pay us twenty dollars a haid. Ain't gonna be no trouble a-tall t' get that many together. An' if'n we can't rustle 'em, we'll fill in with yore steers. See? Duck soup."

Pat Pending silently fumed. He was tempted a time or two to have it out with the four of them, after Cash had returned his gun to him, but he knew that would not settle the matter. He would doubtless be killed, and the outlaws, whoever was left of them, would inherit the ranch, and then what would become of old Seth?

"So we're gatherin' in some of them Slash 3's tomorrer," Cash continued. "We located a herd in a little valley back thar a ways. Must be coupla hundred haid in th' bunch. We'll just nick off about fifty of 'em, and save th' others for some other time. Won't need no PB's this trip."

He seemed to think he was doing Pat a great favor.

Pat could very easily see the tough spot the outlaws were putting him in. The minute the cattlemen began missing their steers and started trailing them, they would at once set him down as the thief. And that would happen almost immediately, he knew. Something would have to be done right away, but what? It seemed that his hands were tied.

The four rustlers drove a herd of fifty or more Slash 3 steers into the lower pasture that evening.

"Never saw a cow-hand nowheres," exulted Cash Haynes. "Just like shootin' fish, this rustlin'. Boys, we got us a mint if'n we handle 'er proper."

"We did see one feller, though," said Lefty Mayhew. "Say, do you know, Cash, I kinda think we ought to've tapped that old buzzard on th' conk an' see if'n he didn't have some dust. He looked like one of them old fossils which had made his pile and was comin' into town to die off."

Pat Pending was listening closely now.

"Wal, mebbe yuh're right," said Haynes. "'Course, though, th' old desert rat was kinda sick—too dang all-in t' do any travelin'—but, at that, we should oughta gone through his outfit."

"We was in a kinda hurry, was th' only reason I didn't bash in his old grizzled haid an' take his outfit," said Lefty.

"Wal, he was dang sick, an' he'll be thar next week when we git back," Cash said. "We'll ride up an' take a peek at his outfit then."

"Where did yuh see this ol' feller?" wondered Pat, who rarely spoke to the outlaws now.

"Back yon a ways just this side o' them brakes," said Lefty. "He was camped at a leetle spring just under them shale slides. Yuh gonna beat us t' it?"

"Hell, no!" laughed Cash Haynes. "Ornery has gone all goody-goody. He ain't gonna rob nobody. Hell!" He spat disgustedly.

That would be old Seth—coming home—maybe to die!

Pat gulped and did not reply to Haynes' remark. His emotions were too deep and too mixed for speech. He turned away and went down to the corral.

The four outlaws were at supper when he led his sorrel out the back way and rode swiftly down the gulley that led to the lower gate. He didn't want them to follow him.

It was nearly midnight before he located Seth's campfire. The old prospector was mighty sick. He was lying on a blanket beside the blaze when Pat rode up. Too weak to raise his head, the old man waited until the visitor, whoever he was, came into the firelight.

Then negligently he waved a weak old hand.

Pat was down and bending over his old friend in a second.

"What is it, old timer? You sick, huh? What's wrong?"

Old Seth smiled wanly.

"Nope. Run outa grub a week ago an' then danged if'n I didn't lose my rifle," he said, weakly. "Just kinda hongray, mostly is all," he said.

But Pat wasn't so sure of that. He felt of the old man's head and discovered that he had a fever, and that was bad.

"You s'pose you can stick in the saddle?" he asked then.

"Why, I reckon mebbe I could, son, if'n you think I oughta. Kinda weak, though."

Pat rummaged through the outfit. It was true, all right. There was not a scrap of food left. And there was no way of getting any, either, nearer than the PB ranch. Certainly he would find no game in the middle of the night.

"Got to get you to the ranch pronto," said Pat then. "No other way out, pal. 'Course, I could ride down an' get you some grub, but if you can stick on th' horse, I figger we better make a try at gettin' you to where you can have some decent grub an' a inside bunk."

But Seth couldn't stay in the saddle. Pat even mounted behind him and tried to hold him there, but in the end decided it would be too much for the old prospector.

"She won't do thisaway," he said then. "Here. I'll get you back onto your bed an' then ride back an' bring you some chuck. Shucks, we'll have you plenty strong in a day or so. Watch yoreself for a few hours. I'll be back come daylight."

If Haynes and Mayhew heard him when he gathered some food together in the kitchen, they paid no attention to him. He caught a fresh mount and hurried back to Seth's camp, making good time, now that he knew exactly where to find it.

The old prospector was wide awake, and Pat lost no time getting some soft food together. He made some soup and tea, and fed the old man out of a spoon every ten minutes until his patient fell asleep, the gnawing pangs of hunger routed for the time being.

Pat remained at the side of the old prospector all the rest of the day and half the following night. He was gratified to note that the fever had gone down and the old man was beginning to feel almost chipper.

"I made me a danged rich strike, son," he told Pat. "Cleaned up I reckon about five hundred ounces o' dust. Then I decided I had me enough. So I headed out for th' old PB ranch. Figgered mebbe you could use th' ten thousand odd dollars in th' old kick, feller."

The old prospector smiled affectionately at the young man.

"An' that's how come I run outa grub—didn't want t' leave till I was sure I had it all. Figured we could use it better'n anybody I know."

Pat's eyes grew misty. Strange how this old man affected him. Always did. Here he was on the verge of starvation just because he wanted to bring the full 500 ounces of dust home—to him!

Pat swallowed hard, then looked away into the darkness. He was thinking of that band of outlaws who had taken over the ranch, and what would happen to Seth Briggs and that gold dust. His lips tightened into a straight line, his eyes grew cold, narrowed and filled with hate. He got up.

"Look, Seth," he said. "I got some chores to do at the ranch, and I got to do 'em pronto. If I don't get back—well, if I ain't here by two nights, you mosey on down to the ranch, see? Think you can make it alone?"

Old Seth looked at the younger man for a minute.

"You in trouble, son?" he asked gently.

"Trouble? Naw, 'course not. Only I got to see a feller—a feller in town—an' mebbe he won't be there, or somethin'. So if I don't get back right away, you come along an' kinda set in th' sun till I come back to th' ranch."

All the while he was talking he was saddling his mount. He wanted to do no further explaining and he knew that if he remained much longer, he would tell his old friend everything. And he didn't want Seth to worry about him.

"So long," he called, and spurred his horse away.

The outlaws had not made their drive as they had planned. There was something in the wind, Pat saw, but they failed to take him in on whatever the good news was. For it was good news, he could tell from the way the outlaws laughed together and drank from the gallon jug they had dug up from some place, and the way they slapped each other on the back.

As a matter of fact, the four rustlers had

made a rich find. Cash Haynes and Shifty Gamble, riding down the valley on their way to the stolen herd had seen something projecting from a crevice in the rimrock. Recent rains had jarred it loose. It was a tin box containing $50,000. It was, indeed, the money Ornery Hummel had taken with him away from that train robbery in the next county four years before.

"Th' son-of-a-gun!" ejaculated Cash. "He had 'er alla time! Musta had some cash besides t' get ahold of this spread! Slick, eh? Wal, we'll show who's slick. Now we got enough to make us a splurge. Hell with th' rustlin' for awhile anyways. Let's go places."

Because they were the leaders, Cash and Lefty took the major share of the loot. The other two outlaws had to be satisfied with $5,000 apiece. Cash and Lefty split the other $40,000.

They were pretty drunk by the time Pat returned to the ranch. It was daylight and the men, who had sent one of the bandits to town for the whiskey, were still up and still going strong.

Pat had come to an important decision. He was going to take these men to the sheriff, explain that they were rustlers and he, himself, take whatever was coming to him. It was the only thing he could do and preserve the ranch for his old partner.

The outlaws quit talking about their new-found wealth when Pat arrived. They didn't care much either way, only it was such a hell of a good joke on the danged goody-goody *hombre* the way it was—him not knowing they had found his cache thataway. And they didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that they were quitting the ranch for a year or so. Had already turned the rustled cattle out of the pasture.

However, they were not too drunk to observe that Pat was pretty grim and cold about something.

Pat dismounted and ground hitched his pony nearby. He observed that the outlaws' horses were saddled and surmised that they planned to make a night drive of stolen stuff. He went inside the cabin. The four outlaws had pre-empted the house now. Let Pat take the bunkhouse, if he wanted to be so danged private.

"Well, look who's here!" called Baldy Jelks, as Pat entered. "Ol' Kid Whosis in person. Come in an' have a drink, Mister Whosis."

Pat stepped inside the room where the four men were making merry. His gun flashed.

"Get 'em up, every danged one of you!" he ordered. "I'm pluggin' any one of you that moves a finger."

Shifty Gamble moved a finger. He went for his gun, thinking he could outsmart the waddy. Cash Haynes would have known better. Pat's quick-flung bullet caught the outlaw in the chest. The hands of the three others stayed high.

"Face the wall!" snapped Pat. They shuffled back and faced the wall as instructed. Pat got their guns.

"We're goin' in to see the sheriff," he said then. He bound their wrists and ran a rope through the thongs, and around each man. Then he hazed them out to their broncs, made them mount and head toward Playa del Rey.

"You're just a plain damn fool," snarled Cash Haynes. "Th' sheriff is gonna take you along, feller, wherever we goes. Yuh can't get away with nothin' like this."

"Shut up!" said Pat. "Open your head again an' I'll gag you."

Once Lefty Mayhew started to explain that they had found the cache and would return the money if he would let them go, but Cash ordered him to keep still, and, anyway, Pat wasn't listening. He was too busy thinking about old Seth, and wondering how he would make out alone on the ranch.

The cavalcade arrived at the sheriff's office in Playa del Rey at noon. Pat dismounted and went in, leaving the men tied on their horses outside.

"Brought you in three tough *hombres*," said Pat to Sheriff Calkins. "They rustled one herd of cattle and was workin' on the second. Also, two of them, anyway, are train robbers. They held up a train in Farmington County four years ago."

"Th' hell you say!" gasped the sheriff. "An' who are you?"

"I'm Pat Pending. Own the PB spread

in the foothills of the Upper Farralones," the waddy replied. He thought that would be enough information to give out for the present. There would probably be plenty later.

"Oh, shore, I place you now," the sheriff grinned, extending a hand. "How're you, Pat?"

"Swell," said the worried waddy. "I dunno about the evidence agin these fellers. There's only my word."

"Wal, we'll throw 'em in th' can an' mebbe one of 'em will talk. You never can tell. Anyways, we can hold 'em a few days till you mebbe can dig up somethin' on 'em. Bring 'em in."

Pat herded the outlaws inside. Now would come his turn. For all of them would, of course, implicate him in the robbery, and the word of two men would outweigh his statements, he knew, since nothing had been proved on his prisoners.

"Wal, they look kinda tame now," grinned the sheriff. "How'ya, boys? Got ketched, hey?"

"Ketched! Hell, you know who this feller is?" snarled Cash Haynes. "This lily-livered gent what brought us in is no other than Ornery Hummel, the slickest gunman and th' crookedest thief in th' whole southwest."

The sheriff grinned.

"Interesting if true," he said. He had heard plenty of accusations before. "Step over here one at a time till I search you," he said then.

Then when he lifted a twenty-thousand dollar roll from Cash Haynes' pocket he gasped.

"Oh, oh!" he said. "Look what we got. Yuh boys all fixed thisaway?"

Well, Lefty was. And the $5,000 in Baldy's pocket was nothing to laugh off.

"Jussa minute," said the sheriff then, pondering. "I got me a hunch."

He went over to his safe, opened it and took out a book containing certain statistics. He compared some figures contained therein with the numbers on some of the bills taken from the outlaws. Then he got up, grinning.

"Into separate cells for yuh boys," he said. "An' keep your traps shut. Th' more you talk now, th' more you're goin' to get into trouble."

"Lock that crook up, too, then!" yelped Cash Haynes. "He's a bank robber an' a killer, I tell yuh. He's Ornery Hummel—"

"Yeh, I know, I know. Wust in th' southwest," the sheriff finished for him.

After the three outlaws were safely in their cells, Calkins grinned at Pat and said:

"Gosh, I'm hongray. Let's go over to th' Chinaman's for sustenance."

After they had ordered their meal, the sheriff said:

"Th' dinero them three gents was packin' around was took from th' C. R. & S. W. four year ago when a passenger train was held up an' robbed of a hundred an' fifty thousand dollars. They was six in th' band, three was killed and three got away with th' dinero. You don't need t' worry none about gettin' any rustlin' evidence agin 'em. They can't get less'n twenty years apiece, mebbe life. Two passengers was killed in that hold-up."

"And—there won't be any—further investigatin'? I mean, this will clear up that hold-up an'—an' everything?" Pat asked breathlessly.

"Shore. Nothin' else to it. They was three robbers got away. Th' express company kept a record of th' serial numbers on th' dinero. I reckon they musta spent the balance mebbe in Mexico or somewheres outside the U. S."

"I had to kill another partner of theirs," said Pat then. "He's at th' ranch."

"Wal, don't let it worry you. I'll send out for th' corpse this afternoon. They would nachelly pick up some others of their kind. Did you search him?"

"No. I was kinda busy taking care of these other pilgrims," grinned Pat.

"O. K." said Sheriff Calkins. "I'll look after everything. By th' way, they was a thousand dollars apiece on them robbers, but last year they raised th' ante. It's now twenty-five hundred. So, as soon as we get 'em off to th' big house, I'll notify you an' you come in an' gather in yore shekels. I take it, since you lost some cows. Mebbe this reeward will kinda take th' taste out yore mouth."

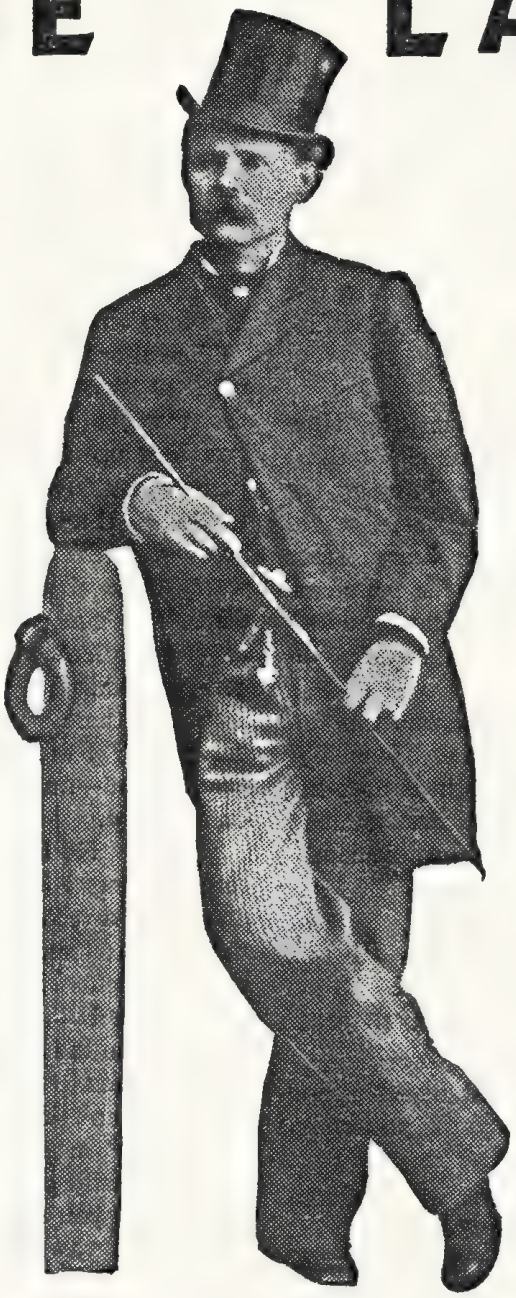
DEVIL BEHIND THE LAW

Call the roll of the lightning-fast artists of the trigger!

High on that roll stands Ben Thompson, the man accredited with the invention of the shoulder holsters. He has every right to be esteemed and honored as a first class gunman. He killed his share of men and died in the end under blazing guns with his boots on.

Some Longhorns insist that he was Texas born. Others relate as how his father, "Drunken Thompson," wandered into the Lone Star state from up in Canada. But, at least, Ben Thompson became well known in Austin when but a boy. He was a barroom urchin.

The men frequenting the barrooms had grown old in vice and sin. They patted Ben on the head as a likely youngster, made prophecies combining his future with guns and ropes, let him finish their toddies and juleps. They taught him to swear and steal and to use a six-shooter.



A dapper dandy was Ben Thompson, the outlaw marshal. More people remember him with a smoke-stick in hand, than a cane.

Ben had a brother, Billy Thompson. The boys, Ben and Billy, grew up much as would most boys without strict guardianship on the father's side. Their father spent most of his time drunk. It is recorded that, when Ben was sixteen years of age, he got into a difficulty with another youth while driving a water cart. In order to soothe his feelings a shotgun was procured loaded with birdshot. Ben promptly emptied it into the body of the offending youth.

The boy was only wounded and in time recovered. For this Ben was haled into court as an incorrigible delinquent. After protesting that it was

TRUE FEATURE

by

FRANKLIN REYNOLDS

an accident, he was released upon his promise to stay out of the saloons and to leave guns alone.

Driving a water cart, however, was just a pick-up job for Ben. He and Billy had a more regular occupation. They sold fish their father caught—when he was sober enough to fish. The mother of the two boys was a handsome English woman of some education who had a great ambition for her sons.

A few years rolled by to bring the Civil War to Texas. Ben Thompson enlisted in the Confederate States' Army. During the War he was drunk but once—drunk when he enlisted, and still drunk when he deserted.

Hundreds of Mexicans enlisted in the Texas regiments. Thompson adopted them as his children, furnished them with whiskey and won their money on pay day. In a quarrel he killed the first lieutenant of his company and two sergeant who came to the rescue of their superior officer. Ben Thompson was now a deserter.

Soon thereafter he returned to Austin. The purpose of his visit, he let it be known, was to organize a cavalry troop for service in the war. His first recruits were a salty lot of suspected hombres. Roger Combs, a respected, substantial and responsible citizen, voiced the opinion of the community. "Ben Thompson," he said, "is organizing a guerilla band of cut-throats to terrorize the country-side by killing and pillaging!"

Thompson was not long in learning of Combs' statement. Ben hunted him up, let his gun go off and put Combs at the head of a procession of people engaged in slow walking and soft singing. Warrants were issued and Ben declined to be arrested. He swaggered about the streets of Austin for several weeks.

The Confederacy collapsed. Ben Thompson was seeking more excitement. He heard a revolution was brewing in Mexico. So he stole a horse and rode that way.

Enlisting in the Maximilian Army under General Mejia he was soon commissioned as a captain of cavalry. Due to what he considered insolence on the part of seven of his troopers he shot them down as a lesson to the others. For this he was arrested and taken before his commanding officer.

Ben had evidently anticipated the arrest. By way of soothing the irritated general he explained that the men were about to desert. He added that he had stolen two beautiful young *senoritas* for the general, together with a hundred head of horses and a thousand pesos in gold!

As a conclusion to the interview Ben was promoted to a colonel and placed in command of the city of Matamoras.

Ben literally took command of the town, and of all the pretty girls he could find. This act culminated in a *cantina* gunfight in which he was on one side and six or seven aroused *vaqueros* on the other. When the smoke cleared away Ben was still in the land of the living to order five of his enemies carried out and buried.

The revolution was failing. Ben read the signs in the sky and deserted to Vera Cruz where he managed to get aboard a ship bound for New Orleans.

In the Crescent City he committed an atrocious murder, blacked his face and hands and, posing as a negro, escaped to Texas.

Austin had not forgotten the killing of Roger Combs. When Ben returned he was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to serve four years in the Huntsville Penitentiary.

Ben Thompson had hardly been released from prison when he became conscious of the fact that large herds of Texas Longhorns were going up the Chilholm Trail to the Kansas towns that had been penetrated by the railroads.

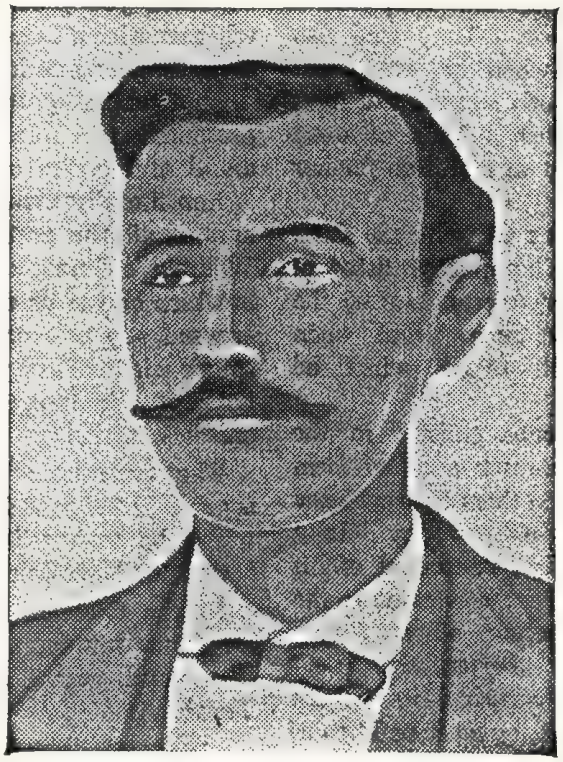
He learned, too, that upon the arrival of the cattle in Texas the buyers paid cash for them and that the owners paid the cowboys their wages. The trip up the trail consumed the better part of three months, and these, for the cowboys, were dry, dusty, womanless, drinkless months, that inevitably ended in a glorious whirl of drinking, gambling and entertainment by the ladies.

"Gambling will be good in those towns. The boys will spend their money," he said to his brother. They whistled for their partner, Phil Coe, and followed the trail to Abilene. There they set up a combination saloon, dance hall, and gambling house.

The Civil War had not been too long ended. Bitter was the feeling between the Rebels from Texas and the Kansas Jayhawkers. The trail towns were policed, mainly, by former officers of the Union Army.

The Texans reasoned that if it were not for them and their herds these towns would not have any reason for being in existence. The city marshals looked upon the Texas cowboys as being something as a necessary nuisance to be tolerated because they were being favored by being able to ship their cows from the trail towns.

Ben Thompson was such a Texan; Wild Bill Hickok was such a marshal.



Billy Thompson, brother and associate of Ben Thompson, who contributed his share of notches on the Thompson guns.

The Thompson-Coe place was the one most frequented by the Texas men. They had done well financially and were naturally inclined to befriend and entertain the riders from their home state. Business in their establishment was good while the business in the places of the native Kansans was not so good. The home-towners insisted that Wild Bill Hickok should find some excuse to close the Thompson place.

Wild Bill dressed in his finest black broadcloth and cleanest starched white linen. Into the Thompson place he paraded and called for Coe. When that hardcase presented himself, Hickok said:

"There is entirely too much disorder in this place. The good people are complaining. I'm giving you two days to sell out and leave town. That goes for the Thompson boys too. You can tell them I said so!"

Turning to leave the marshal found himself staring into the muzzle of Ben's shotgun.

"So it goes for me, too, did I hear you say?" Ben asked. "Well, damn you, Bill, this goes for you." He cocked his shotgun. "Take off your boots and pants!"

To the extent of boots and trousers the officer disrobed. Ben Thompson took Hickok's six-shooters and emptied them onto the floor.

"The next time you come around here," Ben warned, "you'll walk straight into the hottest hail of buckshot that ever fell in Kansas! Get that straight, Hickok!"

Then with his shotgun Ben marched Wild Bill — minus trousers, boots and gun— across the street.

Ben laughed about the episode and that laugh brought death to Phil Coe. Some weeks later Coe had the drop on Hickok when the marshal fooled him into turning his head while Bill emptied two derringers into his chest.

While the Thompsons were operating their Bull's Head Saloon a most notorious member of the Texas gun-slinging fraternity came to town. He was John Wesley Hardin!

Hickok undertook to arrest Hardin on a Texas warrant and got the hot end of the poker. Then he attempted to hire Hardin to kill Thompson. When Hardin refused, and after he had gone back to Texas, Hickok circulated the report that Thompson had tried to hire Hardin to kill him!

The next year Abilene was a dead town. The cattle trail had shifted to Ellsworth. There was more and better water for a trail-thirsty herd in the Smoky Hill River.

The endless prairie of grama grass surrounding the little village quickly restored the tallow lost on the trail.

Ben and Billy Thompson moved to Ellsworth. This town boasted of an eighty-five room hotel among others, some dozen dance halls, fifty saloons and gambling houses and a redlight district called "Nauchville." It was in Ellsworth that the dusty, booted, spurred, gun-toting cowboys took their fun as they found it, making merry with many women and much wine and song. A visitor to Ellsworth in the summer of 1873 had this to say about Ellsworth:

"This is not the most moral town in the world. It reminds me of the California towns of '49 and '50. Gambling flourishes and vice is at a premium. I have seen men from every state and country.

"There is a tall long-haired Texan, booted and heavily armed with a pair of Colonel Colt's finest six-guns. Here are some Mexicans with huge knives in their belts mumbling a language that only the Texans can understand.

"There go gamblers from everywhere looking for prey. Honest tillers of the soil seeking homes are numerous. Stock buyers, merchants, peddlers, beggars, cowboys galore, dead beats, horse thieves, Indians, cavalrymen and even frock-coated preachers mingling in the dusty streets with all the others, including, very naturally, beautiful and attractive ladies from Nauchville."

"And," says another visitor to Ellsworth, "yesterday, Mr. Gore, my host at the Drover's Cottage Inn, pointed out a remarkable man to me. That man was a Texan, Ben Thompson. All the West has heard of him. He is a notorious gambler and one of the West's worst badmen! When drinking he is very dangerous and it is his custom to ride up and down the streets discharging his revolvers and shouting. At such times all the people take to the buildings and stay there until his merriment subsides a bit.

"I was somewhat surprised at his appearance. Hs is about five feet and nine inches tall. His complexion is dark and he has blue eyes. He makes a fine appearance mounted and appears equally as fine dismounted. I met him in the barroom of the Grand Central Hotel. He is fasidious about his clothes and personal appearance. There is not a neater man in town."

Ben and Billy Thompson had very little trouble in Ellsworth during the early summer. None in fact until John Morco, an illiterate fellow, familiarly known as "Happy Jack" drifted into Ellsworth from California. Immediately upon his arrival he loaded up with fire-water and proceeded to proclaim to all within hearing that he was a genuine badman, in fact, *he admitted being the man who had roped the badger!* He claimed to have been an Indian fighter and to have killed more than a dozen white men in California!

A week or so later he was elected to the police force to take the place of a man who had been hauled out to Boot Hill. When John Morco mixed his brief authority with bad whiskey and they both went to his head, it was inevitable that he would have trouble with the Thompson boys. He did, with Billy Thompson.

How the argument arose no one seems to know, but Billy beat him into unconsciousness with his six-shooter. For this offense Billy was arrested by another officer and fined ten dollars and costs.

The morning of August 15, 1873, dawned for the purpose of bringing trouble—real trouble—to Ellsworth!

A group of noted gamblers were engaged in a high-stake poker game in Joe Brennans' Saloon. Ben was present but not playing at the time. Billy Thompson was present for a while and drinking very heavily. The Thompsons were, as usual, armed.

Billy left the saloon soon after daylight, mounted his horse and rode up and down the street shooting his pistols and "treeing" the town. Finally Ben left the saloon to find and quiet his brother. After Billy had sobered up considerably they returned to watch the game. By this time two players had quit and Ben and Billy took their places, still carrying their revolvers.

Joe Brennan had established the rule that no armed men could play in his games. When this rule was called to their atten-

tion they became viciously abusive and furiously dared any man to attempt to stop them from playing or to disarm them.

The players were men experienced in the ways of the frontier. Their practiced eyes knew trouble when they saw it. The game was at an end.

Cad Pierce and Neil Cain, two tall, well built Texans, were professional gamblers. They had been playing in the game. One John Sterling had left the game indebted to Pierce. Later in the day they met in Jake New's saloon. When Pierce asked for his money, Sterling, who knew Pierce was unarmed, slapped him in the face in the presence of Ben Thompson. John Morco, the police officer, was present. He drew his gun and quelled the disturbance.

Ben Thompson when he was City Marshal in Austin, Texas, 1880-1881.

Thompson and Pierce went to Brennan's saloon. They had been seated at a table drinking for some time when Sterling and Morco came in the door armed with shotguns. Sterling called out:

"Come on out, you Texas rats, get your guns and we'll have it out!"

The two trouble hunters then backed out the door and went up the street. Ben and Pierce armed themselves well and followed.

Billy Thompson, meanwhile, had heard of the impending trouble and armed himself with Ben's shotgun in addition to his pistols. He joined his brother. In less than ten minutes, thirty other Texans had armed themselves and joined the Thompson factionists.

The Texans crossed over to the railroad tracks where Sterling and Morco had concealed themselves behind the shipping pens. Ben Thompson stopped and called to them:

"All right, you murdering sons of the devil, come on out. We're ready!"

It was just at this time that Sheriff Chauncey B. Whitney appeared across the street. This officer was a veteran of the Civil War and a friend of Ben Thompson. He saw that serious trouble was not far away.

"Let's not have any trouble," he said to Ben.

"They're going to kill us," Ben remonstrated.

"Put down your guns," the officer directed, "and I'll see that you are protected!"

"I believe you!" Ben answered promptly. "Let's go over to the saloon and let Billy get rid of his shotgun."

The two brothers walked away from the group of Texans who had accompanied them. On either side of the sheriff they crossed the street to the saloon. Billy entered first, followed by Whitney. Ben was in the rear. Hardly had Billy stepped inside when Bill Langford, a Texas cowman, shouted a warning:

"Look out, Ben! Here they come with guns!"

The three turned to see Sterling and Morco following them. Ben cocked his Winchester and started back out with Billy close behind him. Ben fired at Sterling, who had started running and missed him. Billy looked behind him to see if they were being attacked from that direction. He stumbled on the plank sidewalk and fell. His shotgun was accidentally discharged and the entire load was emptied into the arms and chest of their friend—Whitney.

A battle ensued. Learning that Whitney was dying Ben helped Billy to escape from Ellsworth.

While this brother was younger than Ben the two were much alike in appearance, although Billy was a little taller and his eyes were gray. He had far less self-control than Ben and was continually involving himself in trouble from which Ben had to extricate him.

"For God's sake, leave town or you'll be murdered in cold blood," Ben told him hurriedly. "You've killed Whitney, our best friend!"

"I don't give a damn," Billy replied according to a later statement from Ben, "it would be all the same to me if Whitney had been Jesus Christ!"

Billy took his time and rode down to "Nauchville" to tell his sweetheart farewell before going into hiding in the cow-camps on the prairie.

Ben Thompson then agreed with Mayor Miller that he would surrender and pay a fine for his part in the affray if the mayor would disarm his enemies. This the mayor agreed to do and he carried out his promise.

Out of the killing of Sheriff Whitney by Billy Thompson has arisen the persistent fiction that Wyatt Earp arrested Ben Thompson. Nothing is actually further from the truth. Wyatt Earp was not then in Ellsworth.

As an aftermath of the Whitney killing the entire Ellsworth police force was discharged and a Vigilante Committee organized to rid the town of undesirable Texans.

Gun-fights and killings followed in rapid order. Ellsworth became an unpopular town for Texans. They shifted the cattle trade to Wichita.

The next year Ben Thompson was running a questionable faro game in Wichita and keeping Billy under cover.

Incidentally, it was several years later that Billy was arrested by the Rangers in Texas and, despite efforts of Ben to prevent his extradition, was returned to Ellsworth for trial for killing Whitney.

The course of the trial required several days. The verdict of the jury was "not guilty!" In commenting on the verdict the Ellsworth *Reporter* said:

> This was a great surprise to most of our citizens, especially to those who were living in Ellsworth at the time Thompson shot Whitney. They expected nothing less than twenty years in the penitentiary for him.
>
> This is the way most of our old town residents felt—that he got off altogether too easy—that the taking of human life is not considered a crime in Ellsworth.

It was not many months after he arrived in Wichita that Ben left Kansas for the mining towns of Colorado.

Locating in Leadville, he learned that his reputation had preceded him. So, one night when he shot up a saloon and took back by force money that had been won from him, no one was surprised. He then cleared the streets with his rifle and departed for home to tell the folks in Austin about Colorado.

In Austin he opened a gambling dive. Not far down the street the Variety Theater was doing a thriving business displaying scantily-clad females to the red eyes of righteous Texans. The gambling element got so it preferred the alluring and curving figures on the stage to the figures on Ben's cards and dice.

One night when they had been promised that an alluring and sensual blonde would do the dance of the seven veils without the veils, they all attended the theater. That night Ben's place was cleanly and completely deserted. He loaded his guns with blanks, went down to the stage entrance and bluffed his way in.

When the little lady was expected to come tripping across the stage, it was the swarthy Ben who put in his appearance—guns in hand!

He started shooting right at the surprised pleasure seekers. In three minutes the theater was deserted. Ben's gambling casino was crowded!

Luckily, Ben waited long enough to reload his six-shooters with real cartridges.

At the theater entrance the owner and another man were waiting for him with sawed-off shotguns loaded with buckshot,

ends of horseshoes and other sort of home-made shrapnel. Ben let them shoot at him first so he could claim self-defense, then neatly killed them.

Selling his saloon six months later he announced himself as a candidate for the office of marshal of Austin. He asked everybody to vote for him and everybody promised him that they would. This was, to him, an indication that they wanted him to clean up the town.

So anxious was he to do the job and get it over with, and so sure was he of his election, that two days before the votes were cast he raked Austin with gun-fire from one end to the other, killed seven undesirable citizens, ran almost a hundred others out of town and closed up the sporting houses.

Austin was tame! He had trimmed the wild wool. Ben looked at everything he had done and it all looked good to him. But who wanted to be marshal of a tame town? He didn't! He withdrew as a candidate the day before the election and left town riding the cow-catcher on a locomotive!

Time passed and Austin heard nothing from Ben. Then just before the next election he showed up, again announced himself as a candidate for marshal and was elected without opposition. Ben put the lid on the town and sat on it! The town had to be good because he was so bad.

His one mistake had been that he had thoughtlessly limited his own field of mischief. So—when the urge crept upon him to get drunk and raise hell he went to San Antonio to get rid of it.

He had been there before. Jack Harris and Joe Foster were associated in San Antonio in running a saloon, gambling establishment, and vaudeville theater. One of his previous visits had found him broke. He wanted to play poker in the Harris-Foster place.

One story is that Thompson put a diamond into a pot, one of several stones he had somehow acquired in Kansas. This diamond, which he lost, was to be redeemed by him at a certain price, stated by him when he put it in. He did not redeem it. The figure at which he had valued it for betting purposes was more than it would bring.

There were reports that Thompson had, in Austin, made merry over putting one over on the gambling fraternity in San Antonio. Too, it was reported that Jack Harris, in San Antonio, had said something about how dangerous it would be for Ben Thompson to come back there. The other story is that Thompson losing to Harris claimed he had been "framed" and demanded his money back.

Whichever of these stories is true there was bad blood between Thompson and Harris, and this feeling existed in the August of 1882 when Ben decided to take time off from his duties as marshal and go to San Antonio for a vacation.

Anyhow, Thompson reached San Antonio. He stood on the main plaza curb and dared Harris, inside the building and armed with a shotgun, to come out and fight. Harris did not come out and Thompson fired, the bullet ricocheted wildly and fatally wounded Harris.

Thompson was arrested, imprisoned without being allowed bail and was finally tried some six months after the shooting.

This trial was a famous case in which famous lawyers participated. Ben was acquitted and returned to Austin to resume his duties. There he was given a noisy welcome. The horses were unhitched from his hack and it was pulled about the streets by his friends.

After that Joe Foster announced that Ben Thompson must never enter his place or cross his path again.

Thompson was going along with his duties and had, apparently, become a good citizen. He was being a good officer.

Then his old friend, John King Fisher, came to town!

John King Fisher was a badman cowboy. He was fearless, with a record of having killed more than twenty men, not counting Mexicans. His boots, sombreros and ivory-handled six-shooters in hand-carved scabbards were his particular pride. He was six feet tall and well built. He was both a deputy sheriff of Uvalde county and an outlaw. His main hang-outs were along the Rio Grande from Laredo to Eagle Pass and along the Nueces River. He was

about twenty-four when he died, but there are old-timers living, in that section yet who remember when his word was law in Eagle Pass and his name a synonym of fear for those who were not his friends.

He was once indicted in Webb county for murder.

With thirty vicious and armed badmen at his back he entered the court room and informed the judge that while he would not take a chance on being convicted he would be willing to hear the jurist pronounce him "not guilty!" The judge complied and the outlaw left town in peace.

Once he held up a traveling circus, killed a Bengal tiger and had the hide made into *chapajeros*.

Such exploits of his were numberless.

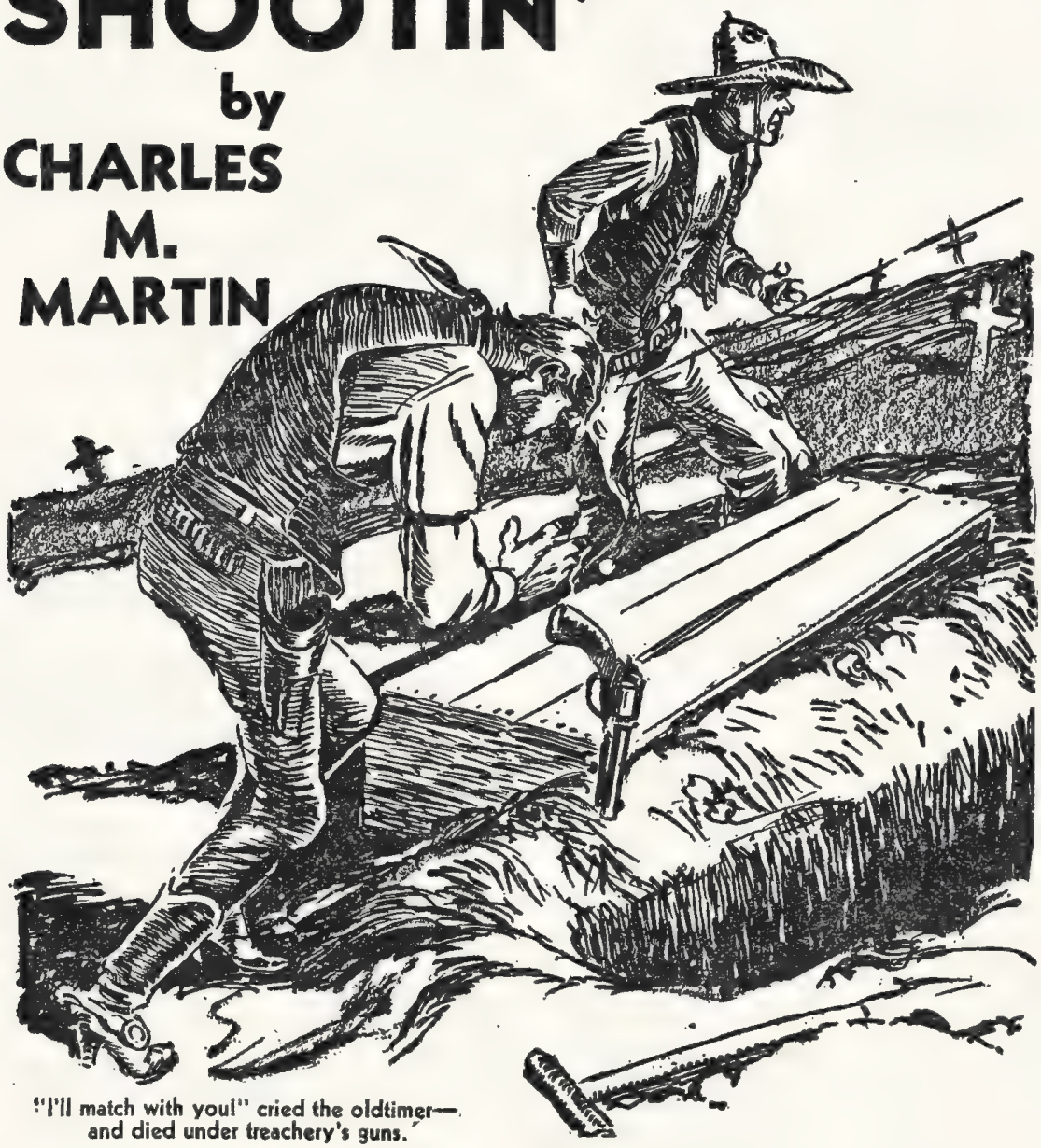
Such was the friend of Thompson's who went to Austin. Together they decided to go to San Antonio.

In the San Antonio *Express* of March 12, 1884, the final chapter is written. Said that newspaper:

> Ben Thompson, the slayer of Jack Harris and various other victims, and King Fisher, the hero of many bloody battles, are no more. They were both shot dead about 11 o'clock last night at the Vaudeville Theater. As soon as it became known that these desperados had been killed, a great crowd of eager and curious people congregated on the inside and outside of the theater and saloon, and became so dense that reporters could scarcely penetrate. Officers were immediately placed on guard and would admit only those who were connected with the establishment and newspapermen.
>
> Thompson and Fisher were both found dead lying side by side as they had fallen. Thompson had two shots in the head both just above the left eye. Fisher was shot squarely in the left eye.
>
> The particulars of the killing as far as we were able to learn them last night, were about these: Ben Thompson and King Fisher entered the theater together shortly before 11 o'clock, both were under the influence of liquor and both were armed with six-shooters. Joe Foster and Billy Simms, proprietors of the theater and gambling house, were both seated in the auditorium upstairs.
>
> Some words passed between the two parties, when Thompson was heard to call Foster "a goddamned thief," and attempted to pull his pistol. Then Jacob Coy, the special policeman, interfered to keep the peace and grabbed Thompson's pistol from his hand. All the parties then drew their pistols and began firing almost simultaneously, exchanging about a dozen or more shots. Thompson and Fisher were shot dead as stated, and Foster wounded, perhaps fatally. None of the other participants were wounded.
>
> As everyone knows bad blood has existed between Thompson and the gaming fraternity here since the killing of Jack Harris, and there were none but believed it would end in another tragedy. On all hands could be heard last night the expression: "Jack Harris is revenged."
>
> Both were desperate men, feared by the law-abiding element in the neighborhood in which each resided. Both have the record of having taken the life blood of many men in their day, and both were noted for their handsome appearance and gentlemanly disposition when sober. They have died with their boots on, a death which is considered eminently genteel by desperate men.
>
> It was a bloody night's work and a remarkable fact is that two such desperate men, both dead and center shots, could be so riddled with bullets without having a victim to add to those whom they had already sent to the happy hunting grounds.

THE TEXAS TERROR COMES SHOOTIN'

by CHARLES M. MARTIN



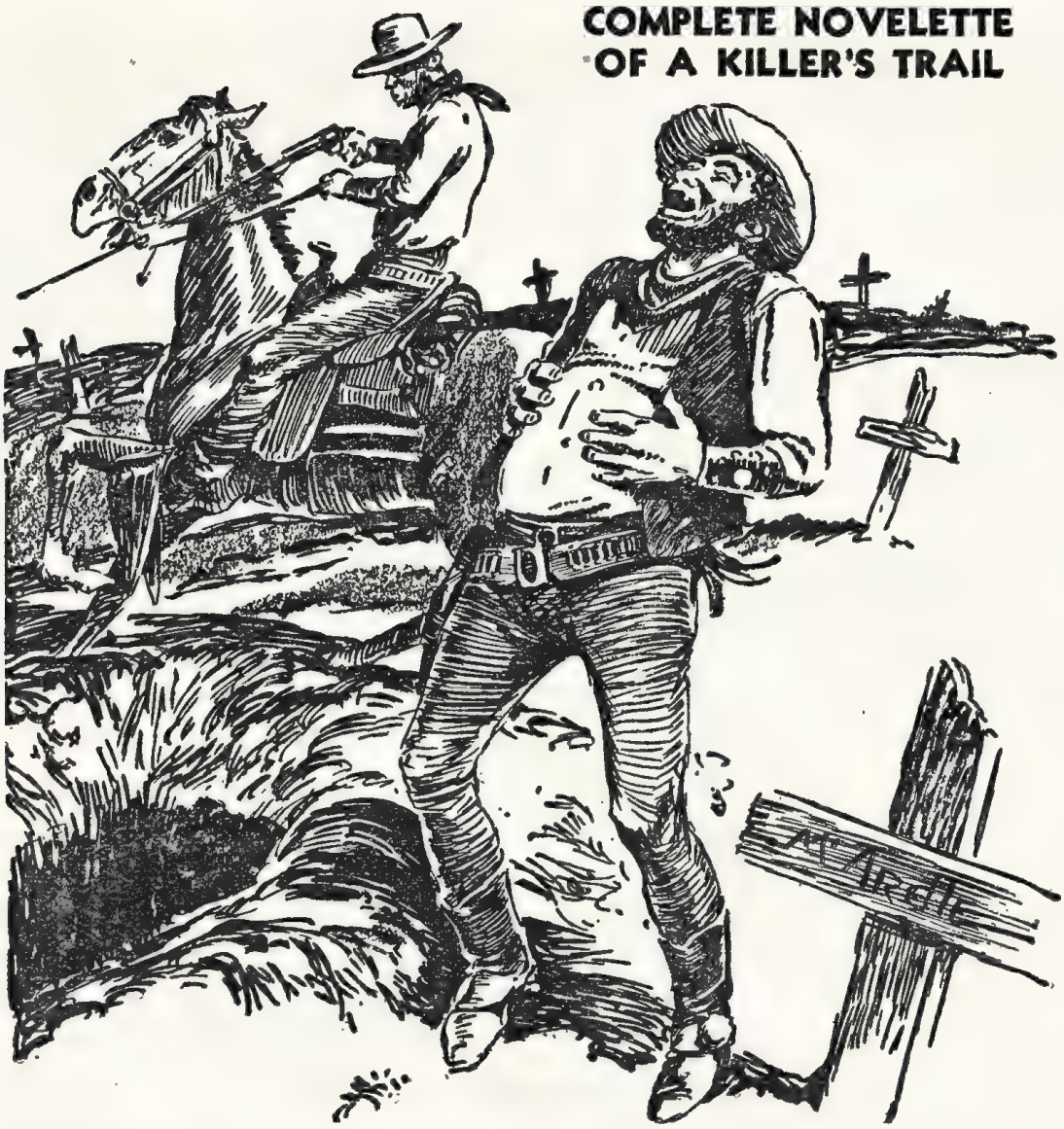
"I'll match with you!" cried the oldtimer—and died under treachery's guns.

Big John Roberts shrugged as he walked from the swinging door to an open space and hooked a worn boot heel over the Last Chance's brass rail. His voice was husky with trail dust as he drawled his order to the waiting bartender.

"Whiskey straight; chaser of the same!"

The bartender walked back to the middle of the bar; reached underneath for a dusty bottle and slid it down the smooth mahog-

? ? ? WHAT PRICE COURAGE WHEN ONE MAN PITS



Bull's sides shook with laughter as Tiny shot from his horse. The trick had worked again!

any with the skill of long practise. Big John grinned his appreciation; filled both glasses without raising his eyes; downed his drink and followed it with a chaser of the same. Raised his blue eyes slowly as a flat voice cracked across the smoke filled saloon.

"It's the end of the trail, Big John!"

The tall cattleman glanced up slowly. He knew that flat voice; sensed the menace in that calm declaration. Some might have interpreted the clipped sentence to mean that Dodge City was the end of the trail for the great Texas cattle drives. John Roberts, for his part, was as direct as the man facing him halfway down the bar. The brim of Roberts' weather-stained old Stetson flopped as he nodded his big head slowly. The long-horn mustache that framed his stubborn lips moved up and down as he answered jerkily.

"I'm uh man of peace, Bull Black," he stated clearly. "Seems like you don't want peace nohow, an' yo're still dealin'."

"I give you fair warnin' not to pass that 3 B herd of our'n back there in th' Strip," Bull Black answered harshly. "You seen fit to push on regardless, an' we et yore

HIS GUNS AGAINST MOUNTAIN-HIGH ODDS ? ? ?

dust fer three days. The long-horn don't live what kin make th' Black boys eat trail dirt an' drink muddy water, an' live to talk about it!"

"She's uh free country an' uh open trail," the big cattleman retorted. "Them J R steers was fed on mountain grass an' they had the same legs as yore critters. I've delivered the herd an' paid off my crew, an' like you done said, she's the end of the trail!"

The drinkers along the bar moved against the side wall without comment. It was an old story to them; this rivalry between trail-herds rodded by hard-riding trail-bosses who would rather die than admit defeat. They knew that Bull Black and his two brothers had never before eaten any Drover's trail-dust until Big John and his hard-riding son had pushed the J R herd of long-horns past the contract drive the Black brothers were bringing up from the Panhandle.

Bull Black had left the herd back in the Strip with Dandy Black while he and Tiny had pushed their horses ahead to call for a show-down in Dodge. It was the end of the trail for either Big John or Bull Black, and neither had ever been beaten.

"I never did cotton none to uh Tejano nohow," Bull Black sneered. "Least of all you an' that chip of yourn."

Big John stepped away from the bar slowly while his brown hands shadowed the grips of the long Colts on his scarred bull-hides.

"You an' yore crew of hellers spooked my herd into uh stampede back yonderly," he drawled huskily. "Only Buck saw yuh comin' an' straightened the herd north tuh gain about another half day on them creepers of your'n. Now yo're belly-achin' because yuh couldn't run no windy on us."

"Yo're a liar!"

Bull Black was as tall as Big John and heavier by forty pounds. He was crouching forward as he spat the insult, and the Texan wasted no more time in argument. His hands slapped down to the worn grips on his thighs with the speed of long practice; jerked to a pause when red flame winked suddenly from Bull Black's left side. He swayed on his boot heels till the gun roared again in Bull Black's hand and shocked him backward. Hardened gun-fighters turned their faces away as the Texan struck on his shoulders and bounced his boots high. His body rocked like a teetering log before settling to the saw-dust.

Bull Black swung around to face the crowd over the smoking muzzle of his gun; and now a little man was at his side with both hands full of black steel. The face of the little man was twisted into a sneer as he shot a question from the corner of his thin lips.

"Any long-horn takin' up fer the deceased?"

No one answered as the two backed slowly to the swinging doors. They were still staring at the body when a tall stranger leaped through the back door of the card room. Well over six feet, he had the broad shoulders and lean hips of the true Texan; and twin guns were tied low on faded, copper studded Levis. Hard blue eyes gauged the crowd and wandered frontward to stare at the body on the floor. He was not more than twenty-four with the look of a top-hand in every move.

"Who did that to my father?"

One of the bartenders answered quickly. "Him an' Bull Black had uh augerment. Bull won!"

"He here abouts?"

The barman shrugged. "Him an' Tiny lit uh shuck right after Big John quit kickin'!"

The tall cowboy walked slowly to the body and slipped down to his knees. His blue eyes widened when he saw the wound in the right shoulder; followed down to the spreading stain in the left breast. Looked closely at the two big hands and back to the old S. A. Frontier model Colts in the moulded holsters.

"Bull Black shot Big John twice before he got his irons clear of leather?" he asked the bartender.

"Looked that way, Buck. I was behind th' bar like now."

Buck Roberts shook his head slowly.

"He couldn't have done it," he stated positively. "Back on th' trail Big John covered both them two an' never cracked down on 'em. Where at was Tiny Black standin'?"

"He was right behind Bull all the time," the bartender answered. "But it wasn't my ruckus, Buck."

An old crippled puncher staggered away from the side wall and came forward. The holster at his right side was empty, the gnarled hands twisted and knotted from rheumatism.

"Yuh tuck my gun away from me before I left th' chuck wagon, Buck," he accused. "An' I was drunk besides."

The young cowboy wheeled to face the older man.

"Cookie, you see this play?"

The old cook nodded slowly, while he hung his head. "Bull Black called fer uh show-down when Big John come in fer uh pair of drinks," he answered slowly. "That half-pint Tiny Black was right behind him, an' he had uh gun in his fist the whole time. Bull called Big John uh liar, an' Tiny shot under Bull's left arm when the ole man went fer his irons. The slug caught the Big Augur in the right shoulder, an' Bull finished his draw an' sent uh slug intuh Big John's ticker. An' there I was without uh gun!"

"They'd have kilt yuh," the cowboy answered briefly. "Where's the marshal all this time?"

"The marshal don't horn in usual when two gents call fer uh show-down," the bartender volunteered. "He'd have to be in uh dozen places all tuh once."

Buck Roberts' face was hard as he turned to face the men along the wall. His eyes were slitted and dry as he stared at them and then jerked his head toward the old Cook.

"It was the end of the trail fer Big John," he said distinctly. "If you see Bull Black tell him I taken up where the ole man left off. Git his boots, Dallas!"

They stared at him without speaking while he backed to the door with his burden. The bartender shuddered slightly as he picked up his bar-rag and mopped the bar. The silent men crowded forward and picked up their glasses as the swinging doors swished shut.

"He's one again' three, but I hate like hell to be them Blacks," the bartender remarked.

On the dirt sidewalk outside, hard-faced men gave way as Buck Roberts and old Dallas carried Big John halfway down the block to Burying Joe's place.

A little man with an enormous chest formed by the hump on his back, came forward with professional sympathy in his brown eyes. He motioned to a table in a rear room, and the two Texans laid the body of Big John on it without a word. The young cowboy slowly unbuckled the crossed gunbelts and hung them on his left arm, after which he turned to the undertaker.

"Fix him up with th' best you got," he ordered softly. "Make th' funeral tomorrow mornin' an' I'll settle the whole thing then."

The hunch-back followed them to the door. "There will be work for somebody else here in town, but it won't be me," he whispered softly. "I wouldn't touch neither one of them three Blacks tuh keep the buzzards from gittin' 'em. Luck to yuh, Buck Roberts!"

Buck Roberts turned slowly. "You know them three?" he asked quietly.

"Known 'em for ten year," the undertaker answered. "Three times that Tiny has shot under big Bull's arm while the other feller thought he was gittin' uh fair shake. Each time there was uh slug in the victim's gun arm, an' another one through his heart. So fur there ain't nobody caught up with 'em before."

"Thanks," the cowboy murmured. "I'll remember that, Joe. It's goin' to make my job uh lot easier."

Buck Roberts and old Dallas rode out south of town to a wooded spot near the banks of the Arkansas. Hunchy Joe waited beside his light wagon; brown eyes sad as always under his small black

Stetson. At a word from Hunchy several men lifted the coffin from the bed of the wagon and placed it across the planks over the grave. Long black coat bulging over the deformity on his back, the undertaker took his place at the head of the grave and began to read a simple service.

EMPTY HOLSTERS

The tall young Texan removed his battered hat and gazed straight ahead with unseeing eyes. Occasionally the tips of his long fingers would brush the tops of the empty holsters on his thighs while the old Cookie wept audibly. Buck Roberts turned to stare at the shallow river while the grave was being filled, and he did not look up when the soft clop of horses' hoofs came through the little grove. He turned when a heavy voice sneered behind him.

"So Boot Hill wasn't good enough fer yore ole man?"

The cowboy turned slowly to lock eyes with Bull Black, who was sitting a big sorrel with his diminutive brother a pace behind. Both were fully armed, and Tiny Black had his hand on right-hand gun. Buck Roberts answered in a slow tired voice.

"We're buryin' the dead this mornin', Bull Black. Other things kin wait till later."

"Wait hell," the big man sneered. "You left word that you was lookin' fer me, an' I figgered tuh save yuh the trouble of huntin' any further."

"Big John found the end of the trail here at Dodge," the cowboy answered softly. "I got all of life still ahead of me to do what has to be done. I'll see yuh later, Black."

The eyes of the big Drover fell to the empty holsters and lighted with cruelty. "They hain't no use uh waitin' when uh gent has tooken up fer the departed," he answered harshly. "Me an' Tiny got yore message in the Last Chance. Right now we're callin' yore bluff."

Buck Roberts stared into the gray eyes above him as he took a deep breath. "It hain't fitten an' proper to carry weapons when uh gent is puttin' his kinfolks away," he answered slowly. "Hit don't show uh respect fer the dead."

"I didn't have no respect fer him when he was alive, an' I ain't growed any since he sudden-like left this vale of tears," Bull Black answered brutally. "She's my guess that yuh got cold feet after what yuh said up town, an' now yo're tryin' to dog it by leavin' yore hardware elsewhere."

"Why, yuh dang tin-bill! I didn't shuck my iron!"

Old Dallas spoke as he leaped to one side to face the big man on the tall sorrel. His gnarled right hand slapped for the old forty-one on his scarred chaps, and Bull Black smiled sneeringly as a shot roared out from the left side behind him. Tiny Black held a smoking forty-five in his right hand while the little crowd watched the old trail-cookie sway on his rusty boots before falling across the new grave.

When they glanced back at the killer, big Bull Black had filled both hands. Buck Roberts was biting his lower lip while his big hands opened and shut with the effort he was making for self control. It was the deep-chested hunch-back who took the play away from him.

"Yo're treadin' on hallowed ground, Bull Black," he said in his deep voice. "The Book says that fools rush in where angels fear tuh tread."

Bull Black shifted in the saddle to face the undertaker. "I've heard tell how yuh've been talkin' with yore mouth, Hunchy," he growled hoarsely. "How yuh've done found two slug holes where there was only supposed tuh be one. Reckon mebbe yuh've talked too much."

"Four times," the hunch-back undertaker answered tensely. "Four times yuh've called for show-down with an ace in the hole. Facin' uh gent empty-handed while that runt back there used uh hide-out or uh swivel holster to give yuh time. They call that murder up here in bloody Kansas, Bull Black!"

Buck Roberts seemed beaten as he watched the sad-faced undertaker stare defiantly into the brutal face above him. Old Dallas sprawled face-down across the newly

mounded grave. Bull Black holstered his six-guns while he scowled at Hunchy Joe. Tiny Black sneered while he covered the crowd with the forty-five in his grimy hand.

"Fightin' talk, Hunchy," Bull Black answered softly. "Eat crow or back up yore wawa!"

The hunch-back palmed his neat black Stetson with his left hand and swept it from his head. It dropped behind him at the feet of the crowd while the cripple faced the two men on horses. Hunchy Joe's head was thrust out over his deep chest. His elbows hooked out while the thin white hands found the edges of his long coat and held them open. Crossed gunbelts came to view under that long coat; ivory-handled forty-fours gleaming white against his black broadcloth trousers.

"Show-down, Bull Black," the hunch-back croaked hoarsely. "An' uh dozen witnesses if that runt behind yuh coppers the play."

The big Drover sneered as his right hand slapped down to the gun on his leg. Hunchy Joe made a circular pass with both hands to flip the coat away as taloned fingers twitched the heavy guns from his hips.

The movements of Bull Black were deliberate in contrast to the smooth speed of the frock-coated cripple, and the quiet was shattered suddenly by the bark of a forty-five. Tiny Black was crouching across the saddle-horn with gun smoking in his right hand.

A black hole leaped between the staring brown eyes as the forty-fours slogged back in the holsters on Hunchy Joe's hips with a pair of little plops that sounded startlingly loud to the circle of men around the grave. The hunch-back did not fall; he merely buckled his knees and sank to earth where he rolled over on his side when the enormous lump on his back touched the ground.

Buck Roberts started forward; stopped in his tracks when Bull Black finished his leisurely draw to cover him. Agony and anger slitted his blue eyes as his tanned face twisted with emotions he could no longer control. Empty holsters out of respect for the dead; helpless before the threatening guns of the killers who had violated every known code of ethics.

"Better give it to him now, Bull!"

The Texan shifted his eyes to the mean little face of the killer who had never been known to fight fair. The tanned face became calm and stoical as the cowboy faced his enemies unafraid, and his slow drawl held them quiet when he spoke.

"Back in Texas they hain't uh man so mean but what he respects them what has taken the long trail West. They hain't uh maverick so ornery but what he kin be shamed into givin' his enemies uh fightin' chanct. Uh fightin' man allus has uh queer feelin' when his time has come, an' mine hain't yere as yet. I'll git the both of you Blacks before I see Texas agin, 'cause they hain't neither one of yuh got the sand to pull down on uh gent what's empty handed."

"Better let him have it, Bull!"

The big man snarled at his brother angrily. "An' ride the Owl-hoot trail fer the rest of our days?" he shouted. "This yere is self-defense because both them jiggers started to draw fust. We'll git this longhorn the same way the fust time he gits sand enough to strap on his hardware!"

"Yeah," Tiny Black sneered nastily. "With all them other jaspers ready to swear to somethin' else."

"I got them rannies all marked," Bull Black answered hoarsely. "An' they hain't forgot that Dandy is comin' up the Texas trail with uh crew of hellers they don't want no part of. Take uh good look at every one of them jiggers jest in case of."

The crowd of men who had attended the funeral out of idle curiosity shifted uneasily as the eyes of the killers marked each face indelibly. Every man in the crowd was armed, but they knew the Black brothers and their gang of hellers who left a trail of new graves every time they came

"YOU'LL BOTH EAT SMOKE BEFORE I SEE TEXAS!"

to Dodge or Abilene. Desperadoes from the Strip who boasted openly of the notches on their guns and their contempt for the law. The corners of the young Texan's mouth twisted as he watched them curl up like leaves before a fire.

"Leave them fellers out of it," he said slowly. "I don't know nary one of 'em, an' I don't need their help. I'm puttin' my hardware back in the holsters so soon as I git back to town. I'll be seein' you two through smoke, if yuh got the sand to draw back yore bet an' cut fer uh new deal."

The long-barreled gun came up slowly in Tiny Black's hand. The little black eyes gleamed viciously as his thumb brought the hammer back, but the Texan smiled and jerked his head toward Dodge.

"Don't slip that hammer, Tiny," he drawled slowly. "I hain't askin' fer no help to settle my chores, an' yuh couldn't git away with it this time. Yonder comes the marshal an' his constable!"

The little killer threw a quick glance over his shoulder and let the hammer down carefully. His gun was sheathed at the same time Bull Black holstered his weapons, and Buck Roberts sighed with satisfaction as the two men neck-reined their mounts and gigged them forward with spurred heels.

"Be seein' yuh through smoke," Bull Black muttered hoarsely. "Like ever' body knows, Dodge is the end of the trail!"

They loped away while the tall Texan watched them with quiet blue eyes. His father was dead and buried; the old cook and Hunchy Joe had died in the defense of what they considered the traditions of the range. He alone remained in a strange land with the odds at twenty to one, but now an unexpected expression of peace rested on his face as he turned to meet the two officers.

"Howdy Bat; long time no see!"

Bat Benson glanced at the new grave and the two figures beside it. Glanced back again at the empty holsters of the young Texan with an angry glint in his hard gray eyes. Jerked his head at the disappearing horsemen in the distance.

"Bull an' Tiny Black do that?"

Buck Roberts nodded slowly. "We was puttin' Big John away when them two rode up," he answered. "They got ole Dallas fust, an' Hunchy right after."

"An' you laid yore guns aside out of respect fer the daid," Benson muttered. "But this here hain't Texas, Buck. You preferrin' charges?"

Buck Roberts shook his head slowly. "We don't prefer charges in Texas like yuh know, Bat. You got troubles enough of your own, so I won't be botherin' yuh none with mine. Take care of them two fer me, an' I'll be seein' yuh again sometime. Adios, gents!"

TWIN COLTS TALK

Buck Roberts followed the shallow river and crossed over when he reached the ford. A broad meadow stretched away from the water where a grove of cottonwoods fringed the bank of the holding grounds where the J R connected trail-herd had been tallied off and delivered to the buyers two days before.

The hoodlum wagon had been sold to a returning Drover when Big John had paid off his crew; only the chuck wagon remained at the camp under the care of a half-grown boy who had swamped for old Dallas on the long drive. A pair of long-barrelled cedar-handled Colts were carefully hidden in the tackbox beside the guns of Big John, and the blue eyes of the young Texan burned with an eager light as he sent the leggy roan through the trees.

He ducked low as a swishing noise sounded behind him; kicked his feet loose from the oxbows as a rope settled around his arms and jerked him from the saddle. He landed on his shoulders and head and lay stunned for a few seconds before rolling to his feet.

Bull Black was out of the saddle watching him while Tiny sat his cutting horse back to keep the rope taut. The big Drover unbuckled his crossed gunbelts and hung them on his saddle-horn while Tiny Black made a smooth pass and palmed the heavy forty-five in his right hand. Then he gigged his horse forward and twitched the loop with a flip of his wrist.

"Sometimes shootin' uh gent is too easy,"

he spat at Buck Roberts. "Me an' Bull has found that it gits better results to break his spirit an' turn him loose."

"Yeah," Bull Black interrupted. "You was close to crackin' back there by yore Pappy's grave, an' now I figgers to finish the job. You ever hear of me gittin' whipped in uh skull an' knuckle rumpus?"

Anger seethed in the heart of the tall Texan. Bull Black would outweigh him by forty pounds, and he had heard the stories told about the fighting methods of the trail bully who never had eaten dust until the J R herd had passed him. A trail of broken men with broken arms and eyes gouged out; of mutilated faces when the heavy boots had finished their work after the victim could no longer stand up. With guns it was different. Size and weight were evened up by the speed and accuracy of the draw; the rule of old Judge Colt.

"I'd have my guns in another ten minutes," Buck Roberts answered quietly. "Might as well call it off, Bull. You an' that runt can't break my spirit no matter what yuh does. Better not go too fur!"

Bull Roberts had walked to within six feet of the Texan, and now he leaped forward and drove his fist at the unprotected jaw. Buck Roberts side-slipped like a shadow and the big man rushed harmlessly by. The Texan was after him like a great cat. He leaped on the broad back before Bull Black could turn; left elbow locked under the throat as the cowboy's spurs raked savagely along the muscled legs.

The big man bucked forward as his great head came down, and Buck Roberts was underneath when the Drover completed the somersault. The Texan rolled sideways; Bull Black was waiting on his knees to clip him with short rights and lefts which cut the cowboy's face before he could roll clear. Both men leaped to their feet, and the Drover rushed in with flailing arms. The Texan was driven back as the heavy fists battered his face; tripped and fell backwards when his right spur tangled with a bunch of grass roots. Some instinct brought his arms up to cover his face, and the Drover's right boot crashed against his forearms to numb them to the shoulders.

Before Black could kick again, the Texan was on his feet dancing out of the range, his long arms hanging at his sides. Tiny Black spurred up to cut off his escape, and Bull Black pounded forward with a bellow of rage and anticipation.

The Texan faced the big man and he tried to bring his arms up, but a heavy right fist crashed against his jaw to knock him to his knees. He tried to get up as the Drover charged; tried to protect his face with heavy arms that refused to respond.

Another blow sent him sprawling, and his head dropped to save him from the next. Blood gushed from his battered nose as the hard fist missed his sagging jaw, and the flow seemed to clear his head. He rolled aside and backward as Bull Black followed him relentlessly; came to his feet with hands up when the big man leaped in to make his kill. Mad killing rage flooded over the Texan's senses as he felt the strength return to his arms and legs; the unbeatable spirit that had won the battle of the Alamo against uncounted numbers.

Twice his left fist flicked out to hammer against the glaring eyes in front of him. Bull Black roared with agony. Then a looping right hand caught him flush on the jaw to jar his head back on thick neck like an apple on a bobbing string. Eyes glassy, he sagged forward with mouth open, and the Texan stepped in and drove a straight right to the unprotected jaw. Bull Black was lifted from his feet and hurled backward just as the clubbed gun in the hand of his treacherous brother rose and fell on the Texan's head. Buck slipped to his knees, snorted loudly as he shook his head savagely to clear away the stars. As he slipped slowly to the ground a faint boyish voice tried to cut through his foggy brain.

A rifle cracked spitefully from the edge of the trees to spin the gun from Tiny Black's right hand. A high-pitched voice broke in shrill crescendo when the little rider reached for his other gun.

"Hist them grub hooks or I'll drill yuh shore as hell."

Tiny Black raised his hands as the button advanced toward him and took his stand behind a stunted tree. The boy was not more than fifteen, but his accent was Texan,

HE WAS ONLY A MAVERICK KID BUT

and he had been up the trail with Buck Roberts. Now he covered the rider while he waited for his young boss to find his feet. He had seen Buck down before, but he had never seen him stay down.

"Yuh better elbow that ole Spencer an' drag yore loop," Tiny Black muttered savagely. "All that crowd of Tejanos is dead 'ceptin' you, an' yuh better light uh shuck afore I gits mad."

"Yo're uh liar," the boy shouted shrilly. "Buck is wigglin' now, an' you better unload an' throw the corpse of that big ox across his saddle before Buck comes clean outen it. Turn around an' drap that left-hand gun before yuh starts to work or I'll knock yuh outen that kak like uh half pint of soap!"

Tiny Black wheeled his horse carefully and dropped the gun. Then he was on the ground slapping his brother to rouse him. Bull Black sat up dazedly; got to his feet and lifted his big boot to the stirrup while the little gunman boosted. His eyes were still glassy as his big head rolled loosely on his thick neck. Tiny Black mounted and took the reins from the loose fingers.

"I'm markin' you down fer my knife, Kid," he shouted hoarsely. "Wasn't fer you that Tejano yonder would be kickin' hot ashes with Big John by now, but I'll git the both of yuh!"

The boy's face paled as he stared across the long barrel of the old Spencer; his finger tightened to throw a slug toward the runty rider no bigger than himself. Tiny Black swore luridly as the hat was whisked from his head to dangle against his back from the chin string. Then he rolled steel to his horse and clattered across the flat as Buck Roberts jerked to a sitting position.

The boy was at Buck's side like a frightened rabbit, helping the young Texan to his feet. Buck Roberts swayed dizzily as his hands went to his head, and the boy reached for his hip pockets with both hands. The cedar-handled Colts were extended toward Buck as he squinted his eyes in an effort to see clearly.

"Yere's yore hawg-laigs, Buck," the boy shouted shrilly. "Them two hain't no more than half-uh-mile away!"

Buck Roberts shook his head and reached for his guns. Rope-burned palms clutched the familiar wood as his eyes cleared somewhat to squint at the disappearing horsemen. Shook his head slowly as he holstered the heavy weapons.

"I'm 'bliged fer what yuh did, pard," he said sincerely to the boy. "Yuh might be only uh button, but yuh done uh man's work today."

"Yuh whipped that Bull Black, Buck," the boy shouted. "Then that runt slapped yuh on the skull with his iron to put out yore lights. I shot the gun from his hand with my ole Spencer yuh done give me, but I couldn't cut down on him, Buck. I shook back of that ole tree like uh Pilgrim with the buck ague."

"Glad yuh did, Harry," Buck answered. "Now pull yoreself together like uh man, 'cause yuh ain't got no kin folks no more. Tiny Black killed pore ole Dallas this mornin' when we was puttin' Big John away."

"Ole Uncle Dallas daid?" The boy's blue eyes clouded for a moment. "I been up the trail with yuh all, Buck," he began bravely. "Reckon I might make you uh hand on th' ole J R connected back in Texas?"

"You an' me is saddle pards," the tall Texan answered soberly. "Yuh got uh job

THE GUN HE TOTED WAS MAN CALIBER

on the J R as long as yuh wants it, an' yuh'll be uh top-hand before we knows it. You kin drive the chuck wagon down the trail after I've finished up some business, so let's git on back there tuh camp so I kin wet down with uh li'l water. An' thanks, pard, fer what yuh done!"

DEATH DANCES

With arms and legs soaked with liniment guaranteed to bring relief to man or beast, Buck Roberts stayed in camp by the waters of the Arkansas until the evening of the second day after his fight with Bull Black. Harry Cole was fulfilling his promise to make a hand, and the knowledge he had learned from old Dallas was turned to good account over the Dutch ovens when he wrangled the pots and pans.

Buck Roberts cleaned his long-barrelled Colts one at a time; thumbed fresh shells through the loading gates and spun the spotless cylinders. Then he snugged them down in the oiled holsters and stretched long arms over his head. The boy watched him expectantly.

"Goin' to take uh li'l ride, Harry," Roberts said quietly. "You stay yere an' keep your eyes on the hawsses. We cain't both leave the wagon at the same time."

"Shucks, Buck," the boy muttered with disappointment in his high voice. "You might be needin' uh pard to side yuh in case yuh meets up with them Blacks!"

The tall cowboy grinned. "Uh gent couldn't ask fer uh better pard," he admitted sincerely. "But yore job is ridin' herd on the chuck wagon till we gits back to Texas. I'll be back in jest uh li'l while, pard."

Dusk was falling as he rode down the dusty Main Street of Dodge. His eyes lighted when he saw Tiny Black pass the swinging doors of the Last Chance and continue down the street by himself. The little killer made his way to a long low building that set well back from the street. Red lights showed from the windows in the rear to give the saloon and dance hall it's name—Red Light saloon. Buck Roberts swung down from the saddle as Black pushed through the doors; tied his horse to the rack and followed without a sound.

Inside the long bar-room and dance hall, the tall Texan placed his back against the front wall and scanned the crowd until he had placed his enemy. Tiny Black was midway of the long bar, his arms around two scantily-clad girls who were begging noisily for a drink. Black threw a gold piece

From his hiding place Buck's rifle boomed. The bullet caught Black in the gun hand and the pistol whipping stopped pronto.

on the bar and called for a quart of whiskey and glasses.

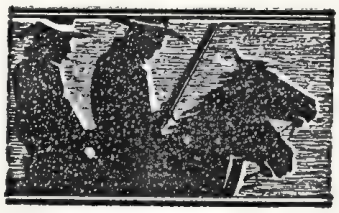
"You gals ain't drinkin' none of that sugar water tonight," he told the two dancing girls. "Yuh either drinks man-licker or yuh don't drink with me."

"Jake with me, big feller," one of the girls answered. "But who's yore bashful friend over by th' door? He seems mighty interested in you for some reason."

Tiny Black swiveled his head and slowly dropped his arms from the girls. Buck Roberts was smiling coldly as he stared into the killer's little eyes, but he did not speak.

"So yuh got over the beatin' Bull give yuh, an' yuh hain't got enough yet, huh?"

The tall Texan continued to smile. "Seems to me you carried that big ox away across his saddle," he answered clearly. "Young Harry said to tell yuh that yore guns was layin' right where yuh dropped 'em when he got the drop on you. Purty good fer uh fifteen year-ole button again uh salty rannihan like you!"



Like all men of diminutive stature, Tiny Black's vanity was his weakness. He could hear the snickers as cowboys and dancing girls laughed quietly, and his piggish eyes grew slitted with hate as he snarled like a cornered rat.

"I'll take care of that Kid after I finishes with you. Yo're uh low-down lyin' longhorn, an' yuh've reached the end of the trail!"

The two girls screamed and scuttled for safety as the crowd fell back away from the bar. The little gunman wet his lips as he swung slowly around to face the tall Texan squarely. Buck Roberts watched that right leg come in line; knew that the little killer was using a swivel holster with the bottom cut out. He waited with that slow smile on his tanned face; his hands hooked in the crossed gunbelts above his hips.

"Yes, I kilt yore ole man," Black snapped viciously. "Like I'm goin' to kill you when yuh git up enough nerve tuh go fer yore gun. Start smokin'!"

"That makes what I'm givin' you self defense," the Texan drawled. "Yuh've kilt three men without givin' them uh chanct, an' right now yo're figgerin' on th' same play."

"Keep on stallin'," Tiny Black sneered. "When you makes up yore mind that it's th' end of the trail fer you, jess start reachin'!"

"I never asks for no edge," the Texan drawled. "She's yore play."

He leaped nimbly aside as Tiny Black slapped his right hand down and up with a clutching jerk. A flashing roar thundered sullenly in the low room as a bullet splashed against the wall where Buck Roberts had stood. Tiny Black jerked around to bring the swivel holster in line as the Texan sideslipped again, and the watching crowd stared wide-eyed at the gun magic that followed.

Empty handed to give his enemy a head start as he made that first leap; hands blurring like shadows as he leaped the second time. The long barrels whipped above the holster-lips before his boots had touched the floor; flashed red with muzzle blooms to disappear instantly in the moulded holsters.

Tiny Black jerked twice; once when a slug hit him in the left breast, and again when a black dot leaped between his narrow eyes. The last shot jerked the little killer back with a thud that made his body bounce when he landed on his shoulders.

The tall Texan was smiling coldly as he thought of what old Dallas had told him about Big John's last fight. It did not seem enough that he had killed this treacherous little gunman who had killed old Dallas and Hunchy Joe to desecrate the funeral of his father.

He turned slowly to face the crowd as his big hands shadowed his guns. "Any body yere want tuh take up fer th' departed?"

Hardened gun-fighters dropped their eyes as he stared at them one by one. They returned to the bar and ordered drinks as the front door opened to admit the stocky figure of Bat Benson. The marshal jerked

his head at Roberts and walked outside to wait. The Texan followed a moment later and stepped to the side of the building.

"Yuh look like hell," Benson said quietly. "How yuh feelin', Buck?"

"Never felt better in my life," the Texan growled. "Met up with them two Blacks day before yestidday after I left you, an' me an' Bull augured with our maulies."

The marshal nodded. "That's what that button of yourn was tellin' me," he answered. "I jest rode down to yore camp, but you was gone."

"Yeah," Roberts answered slowly. "I don't whittle, but I got one of them Blacks. How come yuh to ask how I feels?"

"Because you only got one of them Blacks," the marshal answered quietly. "Dandy Black rode into town an hour ago, an' Bull rode out to meet th' herd. Dandy was tryin' to find Tiny, an' I thought I'd tell you so's yuh'd know what to expect. Me, I'm goin' to be busy as hell up at the other end of town fer the next hour or so."

"Thanks, Bat," the Texan answered in a low voice. "I take that right kindly of yuh."

"Fergit it, pard," the marshal growled gruffly. "I'm uh long-horn th' same as you, an' I thought I'd put you next to somethin'. That Dandy packs uh hide-out gun on uh ribbon in his northwest vest pocket. Watch him!"

"Keno! You got any idea where I could find Dandy Black?"

"Seen him go in the Last Chance five minutes ago," the marshal answered. "I'll be seein' yuh, Tejano."

GUNS A-FLAME

Without a trace of excitement the tall Texan moved leisurely along the dirt sidewalk toward the Last Chance. Men watched him with averted eyes as he scanned their faces briefly. Word of the fight in the Red Light had gone before him, and Buck Roberts knew it as he stepped along lightly with spurs jingling above his high boot heels.

Dandy Black had become restless staying back with the trail herd while Bull and Tiny were enjoying the flesh-pots of Dodge. Usually it was he who rode ahead to make delivery arrangements while Bull brought the wild cattle along with the trail-crew who were paid fighting wages as well as riding pay.

Buck Roberts could understand how the range Dandy had left the herd to ride into Dodge; could see clearly that it was necessary for big Bull Black to ride back to the herd before other members of that hard-riding crew got out of control. For the first time in his memory the team of Tiny and Bull had become separated, and now the little killer would never fire another shot from behind his brother's broad back.

The tall Texan grinned as he looked up at the big sign hanging over the saloon.

Coming into Dodge at the end of the Texas trail, that sign read: *First Chance.* On the reverse side as the trail crews saw it when leaving town for the southern Panhandle, the same sign said: *Last Chance.*

Many a trail ruckus, started back in the bloody strip between Texas and Oklahoma, had been finished in the long bar-room where cowboys usually lined the bar three and four deep. It was no different now as Buck Roberts shouldered through the bat-wings and side-slipped like a shadow to place his shoulders against the front wall.

Hard-faced men glanced at him briefly and turned back to their glasses. Slim Lee was behind the bar nearest the swinging doors; the bartender who had seen Big John go down before the combined guns of Bull and Tiny Black.

The lanky barkeep winked slightly with his left eye as his head jerked imperceptibly to the far end of the bar. Buck Roberts allowed his blue eyes to travel; stopped them when he saw a wiry puncher whispering excitedly to a tall man in his early thirties leaning across the bar to listen.

In spite of the fact that he had ridden in from the long trail less than two hours before, Dandy Black was living up to his name. His scarred bull-hides had been left hanging on his saddle; two heavy Colts with pearl handles were tied low on the legs of his striped wool pants.

Bullets And Blood Mark The End Of The Trail When The Texas Terror Sits A Vengeance Saddle

A white shirt of heavy silk was caught at the throat by a scarlet neckerchief drawn through a heavy gold ring on which a large diamond blazed. A small waxed black mustache accentuated the curve of full red lips. But it was the eyes of the man that caught the eye.

Now those rounded greenish eyes raised slowly to stare steadily at the tall Texan beside the front door. They studied the long arms hanging loosely at Buck Roberts' sides; noted the position of the cedar-handled Colts on the faded Levis, toed-in for a swift draw. A woolen gray shirt beneath a white and brown calfskin vest contrasted to the embroidered vest Dandy Black always wore in town.

"Hey, Dandy," the puncher whispered. "I jest come from th' Red Light where that Tejano followed Tiny uh while ago. They had gun talk an' th' Texan downed Tiny before he got his irons clear!"

Dandy Black stared into his glass without moving a muscle of his face. The fingers of his right hand were toying gently with a narrow ribbon of black silk across his vest, and his lips moved slowly without looking at the cowboy.

"Tiny try to git him with that damn swivel holster?"

"The Texan let him shoot twice," the puncher whispered. "He jumped sideways out of line each time before he made uh pass fer his own guns. Then he shot twice an' slapped Tiny over backwards so hard he bounced!"

Dandy Black nodded slowly. "Bull tole me tuh lay offen Roberts, but I got to take up fer Tiny," he answered softly.

"Yuh want me to back up yore play?"

Dandy Black straightened up and pushed the wiry cowboy aside as he walked slowly down the bar with tinkling silver spurs on his polished, hand-stitched boots. Buck Roberts stayed where he was to prevent any of the trail-crew who might have ridden in with Black from getting behind him. He did take one forward step to balance easily on the balls of his feet as his two hands hooked in the crossed gunbelts above the worn handles of his six-guns. After which he waited for Dandy Black to make the first move. The range Dandy stopped about ten paces from him with thumbs hooked in the armholes of his fancy vest.

"You lookin' for me?" he asked softly.

The Texan shook his head. "Not me," he answered in his slow drawl. "I didn't lose yuh nowhere that I remembers of."

"Mebbe you was lookin' for Bull," Black suggested. "He had uh li'l business to look after down th' trail aways, but he ought to be back tomorrow night."

Roberts shrugged carelessly. "Where he goes an' when he comes back is all one tuh me," he answered. "I got plenty of time, an' I'll be here when he recovers sufficient to keep uh date I got with him."

"You'll be here, but there will be uh load of dirt on yore chest," Dandy Black stated clearly. "I hates to cut in on uh play Bull started, but I jest hear how yuh pulled uh blazer on Tiny over in th' Red Light."

" 'Pears like you made uh mistake," the Texan corrected softly. "Tiny tried to pull uh gun-sneak with uh swivel holster he didn't rightly know how to use, an' it's him that's needin' the dirt on his chest to keep from drawin' flies."

"Yuh pulled down on him before he got his iron clear of leather," Black contradicted. "Yuh smoked him down without givin' him uh chance to tally."

Buck Roberts smiled. "That's partly kerrect," he admitted. "Tiny never cleared leather, but he shot twice from the bottom of his holster, only he shot where I wasn't. I figgered two chances was enough fer any short-horn, so I let him have one slug in the ticker an' one between his eyes which was jest wide enough tuh keep his ears from rubbin' together. Them slugs was for what he did to ole Dallas Cole an' Hunchy Joe."

"Yo're uh liar," Black answered softly. "Bull shot them, too, when they threw down on him first, an' you didn't have the sand to take up for yore pards."

"Uh dozen men saw that play out at Big John's grave down by the banks of the Arkansas," the Texan replied just as quietly. "Not that it matters, because I was there myself as you jest mentioned. That runty brother of yores tole me I was uh liar, an' he's past shootin' some pore hombre from behind Bull's back."

Little flecks of yellow began to dance across the greenish eyes of Dandy Black. No other emotion showed on his dark face as he stared across the smoke-filled room at the tall Texan. Buck Roberts stood in the same easy position with a slow smile on his face, but the wide blue eyes were watching those hands hooked in the embroidered vest.

Dandy Black's left hand left his vest and dropped slowly to poise above the pearl handle on his thigh. Men moved back to the side wall with ludicrous haste as Buck Roberts continued to smile.

"Yo're askin' for it, feller," Black snapped. "Yuh kilt Tiny on uh sneak, an' I've taken up fer him. Fill yore hand!"

"I'm givin' you the same chanct I give the runt," Buck Roberts drawled. "Seein' as yuh've horned into the game, she's yore ante. All yuh need is openers or better."

The slender frame of Dandy Black straightened up instantly as his left hand held poised above his hip. His full lips twisted with uncontrollable anger as he snarled savagely deep in his throat.

"Take it then!"

The fingers of his right hand had strayed to the silk ribbon between the upper pockets of his vest. They flipped outward as his left hand slapped down to the pearl-handled gun.

Then the Texan's right hand dropped like a blurring shadow in a half arc that drew the long barrelled gun as calloused thumb found the hammer and dropped it at the end of the arc. Orange flame winked from his hand which reversed the circular motion to holster the gun as a smoke ring spun and widened across the room.

Dandy Black took a quick step back as his two hands stopped with a jerk. The left hand was in the same position above the pearl-handled forty-five on his thigh; the right hand was holding the silken ribbon with a two-shot derringer dangling against the palm.

Dandy swayed as a crimson stain spread across his left breast; toppled face-down to the sawdust without moving his polished boots. The long legs twitched spasmodically and came to rest as Buck Roberts faced the gaping crowd.

"Any friend of th' departed wantin' tuh buy chips in uh li'l game of draw?"

Sullen eyes glanced at Buck and looked hastily away. The tall Texan walked slowly across the room and turned the body over with the toe of his worn boot. He reached down with his left hand and took the silken ribbon from the stiffening fingers; tucked the derringer in the pocket of his overalls.

"I never whittle," he said clearly. "But sometimes I do collect uh li'l souvenir here an' there. I never did cotton to uh gent what would run in uh hide-out gun in uh show-down like uh cheap tin-horn with an ace up his sleeve."

He turned slowly and looked the silent crowd over with steady eyes, after which he high-heeled it through the swinging doors.

The wiry cowboy who had whispered the warning to Dandy Black was riding down the dusty street toward the waters of the Arkansas. Buck Roberts smiled grimly as he slipped fresh loads in his gun; mounted the tall roan and rode slowly to his camp among the distant cottonwoods. Harry Cole was waiting for him, and Roberts smiled when he saw the crossed gunbelts that had belonged to Big John around the lean waist.

BLOODY TRAIL'S END

Buck Roberts cleaned his guns one at a time at the campfire the following morning. Harry Cole watched him carefully as he spun the cylinder of the right-hand gun and snugged it down in the holster before spinning the left.

"Better you start breakin' camp," the tall Texan told him quietly. "Git all that gear stowed away so we can move early in the mornin'. I see yuh done got th' wagin greased up."

"Reckon I better side yuh tonight," the boy answered soberly. "Bull Black is like

as not to have part of that wild bunch of his copperin' his bet. I been practisin' uh heap with these yere ole smoke-poles."

His face clouded with disappointment when Roberts shook his head slowly. "Not that I don't like your spirit, Harry," he said softly. "Only yuh got to have uh mite more seasonin' before yuh steps out in fast company. 'Sides which I'm countin' on you to guard the camp jest in case any of them trail hellers takes uh mind to burn us out."

The tall Texan went carefully over his riding gear as the long day wore to a close. After supper he mounted the roan and held out his hand to the boy who gripped it hard.

"Git him center, pard," he whispered huskily to the boy. "We're slidin' down the Texas trail come daylight."

Roberts smiled in the dusk and waved his hand as he cantered away. He had noticed the dust cloud to the west; bed-ground for the tired 3 B trail-herd. It meant that Bull Black would be waiting for him at the Last Chance; waiting to smoke him down the minute he walked through the swinging doors. At the end of the street he met Bat Benson and swung down in the shadows as the grizzled marshal called softly.

"Bull boiled into town an hour ago," Benson volunteered in a hoarse whisper. "He got the news an' begun to licker up, an' right now he's layin' back in the Last Chance waitin' fer you to poke yore nose through the bat-wings. Yuh tole him yuh'd see him through smoke, an' he figgers on seein' you fust!"

"Thanks, Bat. I better not keep him waitin'."

The marshal watched him ride away through the gloom; mounted his own horse and followed at a distance. He grinned when the Texan cut around back lots instead of riding up to the front door.

The marshal tied his horse to the rail and pushed through the swinging doors; picked a space against the side wall and leaned back carelessly to wait. The long saloon was packed three-deep at the bar with an open space at the far end. Barrel-chested Bull Black stood there drinking alone; his eyes fastened on the swinging doors out front.

The bartender, Slim Lee, glanced from the killer to Benson as his left eye drooped when his head jerked slightly to the rear. Bat Benson allowed his eyes to wander down the bar as a side door opened in the card room to admit a tall figure who slipped quickly against the wall. Buck Roberts had come to keep his date, and his blue eyes sparkled while he stared at the broad back of the man who had killed his father with a cheap gun-sneak.

The men against the bar saw the Texan first, and glasses were shoved back as they stepped carefully to the wall. Black was staring at the front doors; he stiffened and straightened up.

"Noticed yuh'd delivered yore herd, Bull. Dodge is the end of the trail!"

The big man sneered as he turned to face the Texan squarely. "The end of the trail fer you," he growled savagely. "Yuh didn't have the sand to come in the front door like uh white man!"

"I said I'd see you through smoke," Roberts reminded him. "But I wanted uh li'l pow-wow fust off. I squared up fer ole Dallas an' Hunchy Joe last evenin' like yuh might have heard."

"With me she's different," Black sneered, but now his thick voice was almost a whisper. "Yuh pulled uh blazer on pore li'l Tiny, an' yuh gunned Dandy down without givin' him uh chanct."

"Yeah," Buck Roberts answered softly. "Tiny slapped uh swivel holster, an' Dandy made uh play for uh hide-out on the end of that black ribbon. Yo're the last of uh nest of snakes, an' I'm wondering what kind of uh windy yo're figgerin' on tryin' tuh run in."

A man at one side of the card room allowed his hand to slip down to his gun. Bat Benson coughed suggestively; the gunman glanced at the marshal and hastily raised his hands to hook the thumbs in his vest when he saw the marshal's gun covering him. Several other hands sought safer resting places as the marshal glanced over the crowd. Buck Roberts saw the move and smiled with the corners of his mouth, while Bull Black swore under his breath as his shoulders drooped to a crouch.

Eight of his men were in the saloon, but he had not counted on the presence of the marshal. Neither had he figured the Texan to come through the back door. He had heard about Roberts walking through the front doors of both the Red Light and the Last Chance when he had called for show-downs with Tiny and Dandy. With Tiny behind him now, Buck Roberts would have had little chance, but Tiny was already filling a hole in Boot Hill with Dandy. He was the last of the Blacks, and this was the end of the trail.

Tiny and Dandy were dead, but compared to his speed with six-guns they had both been creeping snails. Buck Roberts watched the sudden change taking place as he waited for Bull Black to start the play. He knew that whatever it was would not be square and open.

"Right now yo're shakin' in yore boots," Black sneered.

Buck Roberts reached for the makings with his left hand. Not a flake of tobacco spilled, and Black reached for his own sack of tobacco as the Texan's thumb nail scraped the head of a match to fire his smoke. The Big Drover rolled his cigarette with steady fingers and fired it before he spoke.

"Nice we got this li'l ruckus all legal an' proper," he sneered. "When you an' Dandy met, the law had business elsewhere. Looks like yuh needed help to back up yore play!"

"Didn't need it, but I'm thankful jest th' same," Roberts answered with a slow smile. "Seein' all them trail wolves of yours scattered around, I might have stopped uh slug in the back accidental. This way it makes you come out in the open an' stand on yore own!"

He flipped the cigarette to a brass spittoon and hitched up his belts. His thumbs hooked above the cedar handles as Bull Black dropped his smoke and ground it under his boot.

"I'm countin' three," the Drover said loudly. "After that it's the end of the trail fer you, you damn Tejano!"

"Count till yuh gits tired," Roberts answered. "I'll play these!"

He tapped the butts of his guns as he spoke. Bull Black fell into the gunman's crouch with hands above his holsters. His voice was husky as he mouthed the first numeral.

"One!"

Buck Roberts was paying no attention to the count. He was leaning forward with eyes fastened on the coarse face opposite him. Both hands were poised above his guns; palms toward the sawdust-covered floor.

"Two!"

Dynamic action as the big man snarled the second numeral. His hands slapped down to the moulded holsters like the strike of angry snakes. The heavy barrels seemed to leap upward to meet his taloned fingers.

Then the Texan's right shoulder twitched forward as his fingers found the right-hand gun; came up with a circling pull as thumb found the hammer with fore-finger already triggering the spring. Red flame leaped out from his hip as thunder echoed back from the low ceiling with a roar that jerked every man in the crowd up on his toes.

The twin guns hung on the lips of Bull Black's holsters as he swayed like a tree in the wind; plopped back in the moulded leather as the big killer crashed to the sawdust. Came the old query from the lips of the crouching Texan as he faced the crowd.

"Any hombre takin' up fer the departed?"

He sheathed his gun as Bat Benson came forward. "Self defense, an' the deceased tried to draw out of turn," the marshal announced with finality. "Th' law speakin', gents. Bull Black asked for it, an' he come to the end of the trail!"

Buck Roberts turned his back on the crowd and walked to the front door with the marshal. Benson was waiting when he returned with his horse, and the tall Texan held out his hand before stepping across the worn saddle.

"So long, Bat," he drawled softly. "Me an' th' button is headin' back down the Texas trail come sun-up. Be seein' yuh next trip."

"Adios, Tejano," the marshal answered as carelessly. "I'll be lookin' for yuh yere at the end of the trail!"

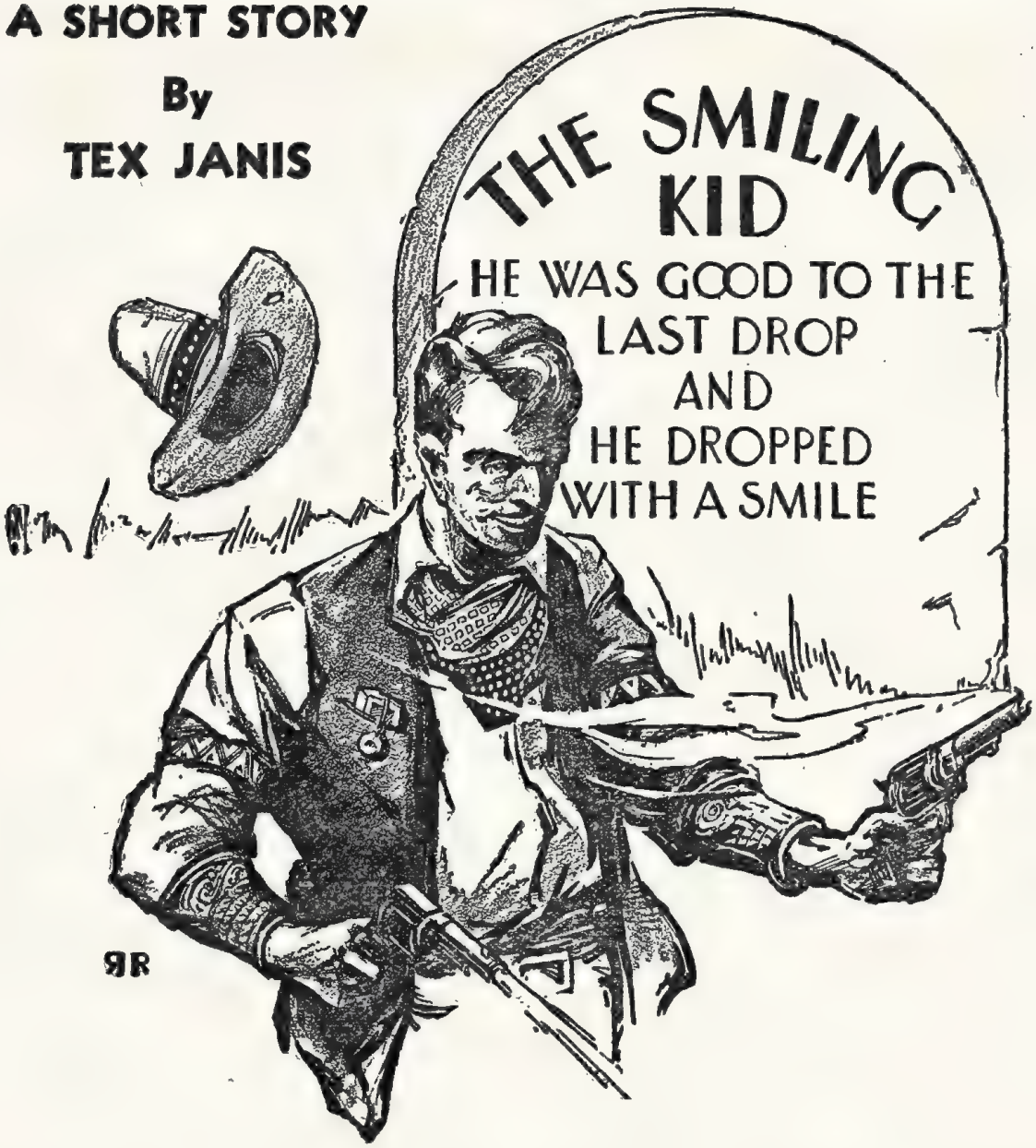
A SHORT STORY

By

TEX JANIS

THE SMILING KID

HE WAS GOOD TO THE LAST DROP AND HE DROPPED WITH A SMILE



The boys on the old 7 Up spread dubbed him Smilin' Kid, before they found out what was the matter with him. He was always smiling. If something funny happened, he smiled with his steady gray eyes. If it was not so funny he smiled with only his lips. Then, one day they saw him mad, staring angry. He was still smiling, and he looked like the devil. Then they knew that there was something wrong with his face, but the name stuck. Sometimes they called him Smilin', and sometimes they called him the Kid. They learned that his smile was not always the same, and could tell when to laugh with him, or curse with him, but in fair weather or foul, he was always smiling.

Jimmy Milford was his name, but nobody on the 7 Up knew it. He drifted into headquarters about the time the first blade of grass rose that spring, and asked for work. Rimp Rollins was the toughest range boss that ever cussed a cook, or drove a gang of hands until they cried—or cussed and wanted to kill him.

"What can you do?" asked Rimp, as he looked that six foot of lean, stoop-shouldered boy over. Smilin' looked to be about twenty, and no one would have thought him a top hand.

"Anything you tell me to do," smiled the Kid.

"Huh. I ain't never saw a man yet that could do that," growled Rimp. "Rope you out a saddle string, and I'll try you. If you can't deliver the goods, you'll fire yourself."

That was all. Rimp sat his horse watching the Kid, as he uncoiled his rope, and walked into the corral where the "free bunch" was. The Kid swung his rope with a whistling sound, and the horses stormed around him, while he looked them over.

"Hey!" yelled Rimp. "What are you doin'? Tryin' to make them braunks break out of the pen?"

"No," replied Smilin'. "Just lookin' 'em over. They's some right good ones in here that the other boys has overlooked." At the same moment, the Kid's rope settled over the head of a rangy blue-roan, and Rimp grinned.

The Smilin' Kid went on roping until he got his string, and every time he roped one, Rimp Rollins grinned. When he pulled the last one out, it was the prettiest horse, and really the best one in the remuda, but with a devil in him as big as a houseboat. The sleek-coated half-breed and Rimp got set for some fun. Then he frowned. That was too much. He didn't want to see that kid killed, just because he was ignorant.

"Hold on a minute, Kid," called Rimp. "You better not mount that cyclone. He's killed three men, and nobody has ever been able to ride him down to a walk."

The Kid just looked at Rimp and smiled. The next second he was in the saddle, and that outlaw was doing his stuff. He did plenty, but the Kid was still there. Suddenly, something happened to the outlaw, and he started to run out of his satiny sorrel hide. The Kid turned him round and round, and in a few minutes rode up to Rimp, with his horse in a walk.

"Well, I'll be damned," grunted Rimp. "If you can ride that string you got, you'll have the best mounts of ary man in the spread. Are you a braunk-buster?"

"No, sir, but I can ride 'em a little," smiled the Kid.

"A little, hell," snapped Rimp. "You can ride a moonbeam. If you can do what I tell you to do, as well as you can do what I tell you not to do, I can use you."

The spread went onto the range, and started the big spring drive. It was just like any other round up—at first. The weather was fine, and things went along smoothly. Rimp Rollins drove his men like galley-slaves. Some of them cursed, one or two quit, but the Kid stayed on, and came up smiling after every hard, unreasonable task that any one set for him. The smile was not only on his lips, but in his good gray eyes. He was always in a good humor, obliging, and left nothing undone that would help the other fellow.

"Damned curiosity," mused Rimp Rollins. "He has rid them outlaws ragged, and they are best saddle string in the spread, just like I said they would be. I have driv him like a hound dog, and he ain't squealed once. I aim to let up on him. I've done my damnedest to wipe that smile off'n his face, and it won't come off."

About that time, it began to rain. A big herd had been gathered, and they were wild and rollicky. It stormed and rained every night, and the boys had to double up to hold them. The hands got cross. The wood was wet, and the food half-cooked. There is always one or two fellows in a big spread that know they are bad, and want to run it over someone. Speed Doree was like that, and the bad weather and double duty at night had not helped him any. Speed was a good hand, all right. The cattle had run in the night, and the devil had been to pay. Speed had stormed for the head of the herd, meaning to turn them, and then brag about it. When he had got to the leaders, he saw by a streak of lightning that there was one rider already there, and that he was building a wall of solid horseflesh that was turning them into a mill. That rider was the Smilin' Kid, on the sorrel outlaw that he had tamed.

That little episode griped Speed sorely. Rimp Rollins and Old Chet Howard were sitting by the campfire, cursing the weather when the extras rode in at daylight. Chet was a leathery old waddy, who had helped select the 7 Up brand, and put it on the

first yearling. He was the only man in the spread who could tell Rimp Rollins where to head in, and get away with it. The cook was busy with his pots and pans. It was raining, and he had on an old, sawed-off slicker that was none too clean. Speed and the Kid approached the campfire at the same time. The Kid was smiling as usual, but Speed was on the prod.

"Well, did you hold them cattle?" asked Rimp.

"Yes," snapped Speed.

"I reck'n you was the only one that could head 'em, as usual," grinned leathery old Chet.

"You go plumb to hell," snarled Speed, and then turned on the cook. "Here you, cookie. Take that damned lousy slicker off. What you cook is bad enough at best, 'thout having the soup dripping off'n that filthy rag into everything we have to eat. Wonder we don't all have the cholera." Speed said more, plenty more, and it was rough. He even called the cook by a lot of names that were not very nice. At last, Rimp Rollins said:

"That'll do, Speed. The cook is having hard enough time to get us anything to eat, in this rain with wet wood and all, without anybody riding him. Cut it out."

Speed subsided, because nobody talked back to Rimp Rollins, but it put a bad taste in the blustering puncher's mouth, and he was looking for trouble with somebody that he could ride.

All this time the Smilin' Kid had stood looking on, with his inevitable smile on his face, and laughter in his gray eyes. He was not thinking of Speed at all. What he was thinking was that he very much preferred the leakage from the old slicker, to what would run off the cook's filthy old woolen shirt when the slicker was removed. Speed had no idea what was in the Kid's mind. He looked up and saw the smile, and the laughter in the Kid's eyes, and it set him wild.

"Think it's funny to see somebody get called, do you?" snarled Speed. "Straighten that map of yours, or you'll get called."

"What do you mean?" asked the Kid, the laughter going out of his eyes, to be replaced by a look of hurt surprise, but his lips still smiling beautifully.

"You know what I mean, damn you," grated Speed. "Get that idiotic grin off'n yo' face, and do it now."

The Kid's eyes changed again. They narrowed a little, and he said:

"Speed, I ain't smilin' at you. I—I can't—"

"Hell, you can't," roared Speed, beside himself with rage, now. "Take it off, I tell you."

"If I don't, then what?" asked the Kid, his eyes going harder and his voice a low hum.

"I'll take it off," snapped Speed, slapping his hand to his gun, and starting it from the holster. Then he stopped. The Kid's rusty old forty-five was out and on him, and he said, still smiling with his lips, and all the devils in hell peeping from his narrowed gray eyes.

"Go ahead and draw it. Somebody has got to kill you. It might as well be me."

"Here, you two fools," stormed Rimp Rollins. "Put them guns up and behave yo'selves. Speed, you damn fool, ain't you got sense enough to know when you get a showdown?"

The guns were holstered, but Speed was far from satisfied. He had been the bellwether of the spread up to that time, and to have a kid call him like that was bitter in his mouth. The Kid turned and walked away from the camp, to saddle a fresh mount while waiting for breakfast. A moment later, Speed followed him. When they were out of hearing, Rimp Rollins said:

"Chet, did you see what I seen?"

"I seen the Devil," grinned Chet. "They's something the matter with the Kid's face. He can't help smilin' with his lips, but he shore had hell in his eyes."

"He did, and some more," said Rimp. "He shore called Speed good and plenty, and I'm glad of it. Like the Kid said, somebody had it to do, and now it has been did."

That was all that was said about it just then. It was nothing unusual for cow hands to quarrel, and sometimes shoot it out, when they were all torn up from loss of

sleep. So, Rimp forgot all about it. The other boys came in. They all had breakfast. Rimp did notice one thing. Speed kept his eyes on the business of eating, while there was not a moment that he could have got his gun without the Kid's gray eyes seeing him. The men saddled up, and Rimp was still at camp, giving the cook some orders about moving, when Speed came up, leading his own mount.

"What's the matter now?" asked Rimp.

"Nothing the matter with me," growled Speed. "I'm just quitting this lousy outfit. I don't work for no damned outfit where the boss takes sides in a personal quarrel between two of his men, especially when one is a top hand, and the other is a damned drifter that ought to be wranglin' horses, or helpin' the cook."

"Oh, thataway," said Rimp Rollins, calmly. "Well, you can quit. I ain't ever saw ary damn man on earth that I couldn't get along without. About me busting into that little game, you orto be damn glad I done it. If I hadn't, we'd be burying you now, in a mighty wet grave. Here's your time. Get yo' money at headquarters. So long, and good luck."

Speed mounted and rode away. He was barely out of sight when the Smilin' Kid came back to camp.

"Hell's bells," snorted Rimp. "Wonder if I'm going to lose the whole spread on account of that little quarrel. Hello, Kid. What is it now?"

"Why—why—I want to apologize about that little mess I got into with Speed. It was all on account of this damned smile I got on my face. It has got me into trouble before. I tried to explain it to Speed, and he wouldn't let me. I—"

"What are you driving at?" snapped Rimp Rollins.

"Why, it's thisaway," said the Kid. "I had spotted fever when I was a little chap, and it done something to my face. After that, I smiled all the time. I even smiled when I was crying. I weren't laughing at Speed, and if he would of let me tell him—"

"That's all right, Kid," said Rimp Rollins, in a kindly tone. "I been wondering myself, but I understand now. I'll tell the boys, and you won't have no more trouble in this spread."

"Thank you, sir," smiled the Kid, and this time the smile was in his eyes. He mounted his horse, and trotted off toward the herd.

"Now, I know I'll be damned," said Old Chet, who was still squatting by the fire, trying to get dry before he rode. "Rimp, that puts me in mind of a spotted dog that I knowed one time. That dog's head was dang nigh white, but he had a few smears of liver-colored hair between his ears and around his eyes, that made him look plumb mean, vigorous, and fight-like. Every dog that sees him thinks he's going to jump him. The results were that that pore spotted dog fit, and got chawed up until he learned how to fight. Then dang my hide if he didn't turn round and whup hell out'n every dog in the settlement. They even ganged on him, and couldn't whup him."

"I reck'n that just a lie you're tellin'," grinned Rimp Rollins, "but I want you to tell the boys about that mess, and make it plumb plain that the Kid don't mean no harm by smilin'. If any more jumps him about it, I'm apt to be short-handed, for he's lightning with a gun, and they ain't a thing wrong with his nerve."

Rimp and Chet got the story to the other boys. They all laughed about it. No one was sorry that Speed was gone from the spread. Rimp made it plain that the Kid's smile was an affliction that he couldn't help. After that, the name "Smilin' " was dropped, and the boys just called him the Kid. Nothing was said about it, but they all wondered what would happen if Speed and the Kid ever met again.

When Rimp and Old Chet told the other boys about that little mess, they didn't stress the fixed smile so much. What they did make plain was that if anybody thought he could get a gun in position quicker than that Smilin' Kid

could, he was just plain crazy. They did tell the boys that if they would watch the Kid's eyes, they could tell when he was smiling, and when he was not.

The big spread worked on back to headquarters with the herd. The Kid made a top hand, and there was no more trouble. Nothing had been heard of Speed Doree. It would be no trouble for Speed Doree to get work, for he was a real cowhand, and aside from his blustering and vanity everybody thought he was a good fellow. No one supposed that Speed would harbor a grudge against the Kid. That is, nobody but the Kid himself, and he said nothing.

He thought plenty. He lived a well-known Indian philosophy, which was that the first time a white man mistreated a trusting Indian, it was the white man's fault; the second time, it was the Indian's fault for giving the white man a chance to wrong him. The Smilin' Kid didn't mean to give Speed another chance, if he could help it. He hoped he would never see the blustering puncher again, for he knew, instinctively, that Speed was not satisfied.

The weeks passed on. The Spring work was finished, and the beef herd started to the shipping point. The Smilin' Kid was going along with the beef. Just before they started, the Kid said:

"Mr. Rollins, I reck'n I better draw my pay before we start. I'll help you with the beef until it is loaded, and than I reck'n I'll drift."

"Drift?" said Rimp. "Why— What's the matter? I like your work, and I like you. I never had a better hand. What's wrong with your job?"

"Nothing wrong with the job. I like to work here, and you have treated me mighty white, since—since you found out about that smile I got. The trouble is—I don't want to kill nobody."

"Oh, thataway," said Rimp, with a funny note in his voice. "Who the hell do you think you are going to have to kill? If it's anybody in this spread, just show him to me, and you won't have to kill him."

"It ain't none of our boys," declared the Kid. "They are a lot of plumb good hombres, but—you seen that mess that I had with Speed Doree. Speed aims to kill me. I don't know whether you seen his eyes or not, that morning, but killer was writ in 'em plenty plain. I slips out of Texas, and comes out to this country to get out of trouble, and then I rides right into it. I heard two fellers talking yesterday that didn't know who I was. One of 'em says Speed is working over in the Sweetwater country. Said Speed did aim to go to Canada, but gives it out that he had a man to kill before he leaves this section, and—"

"Aw, hell, Kid," said Rimp. "Don't pay no attention to that. Them two waddies has heard of yo' run-in with Speed, and was just trying to get a rise out of you. Somebody had told them about it, and then pointed you out."

"Maybe that's right," smiled the Kid. "I hope it is. I runs out of Texas to keep from killin' a feller, and—"

"Are you afraid of Speed?" asked Rimp, realizing how foolish the question was. He just wanted to see what the Kid would say.

"If you mean am I afraid he'll kill me, no," said the Kid, slowly. "If you mean am I afraid I'll kill him, yes. I know I'll kill him, if he ever jumps me again, and I don't want to. I—I'll take most anything to keep from having trouble, but— You can understand, Mr. Rollins, that I don't even know I'm smiling. It's an affliction that I can't help, and— I wouldn't blame a hunchback for killin' a man that was mean enough to laugh at him, and make sport of his deformity, and this smile of mine is the same thing. I don't mind the boys callin' me Smilin'. I used to call a poor feller Humpty, because he was a hunchback, and I loved him like as if he had been my brother. Still—"

"I understand, Kid," said gruff old Rimp Rollins, with a note of gentleness in his voice that was not often there. "You are a good hand and a good scout. I like you, and want to keep you. They ain't ary man in my spread that will ever ride you about that smile, now that they know about it. Forget all about Speed Doree. That was just talk that them two waddies was making. Anyway, Speed is a brag and a bluffer. He has likely forgot all about it by now."

So, the herd moved on the shipping point, which was a considerable town, and

a pretty wild place, because many ranchmen shipped cattle from there. It was a typical wild cowtown. Rimp and his hands loaded the steers, and when the work was done, Rimp said to the boys:

"Come on, fellers. I have driv you pretty hard all spring, and now I'm going to show you a good time. We'll take this old town apart, and see what makes it tick. Order what you want, to eat or drink, play some poker, and get the grouch out of your systems, so we can go back and do some more work."

shouldered, and he keeps a smile on his face all the time. It is one of them smiles that won't come off—maybe. If I can get him where I want him, I aim to take it off."

"I gotcha," chuckled Buck. "I'll locate him for you, then watch the fun—if I don't have to help you."

"Help, hell," blustered Speed. "I don't need no help. All I want is a chance, and somebody to keep the dogs off'n me, if the whole damn 7 Up spread horns in on the deal. They won't get to circulating until night, after they get through loading. Any-

The Smilin' Kid Had The Smile Of An Angel, But His Holsters Bore The Devil's Twin Guns

Rimp Rollins wasn't a bad hombre at heart. He had been a puncher before he became a foreman, and he knew how to handle men. They set in to have one wild, hilarious time, and Rimp footed the bills. He was feeling fine, but there was one thing that he did not know. That was that Speed Doree was working for the Lazy Loo, over in the Sweetwater valley. The Lazy Loo outfit had shipped their beef the day before that, and a lot of the hands were still in town. Among them was Speed Doree. Speed had picked up a new sidepartner, who was worse than Speed himself. The first time Speed glimpsed a 7 Up puncher, he pulled his new partner, Buck Deal, into an alley, and said:

"Buck, I got some good luck, and I'm goin' to crowd it."

"How come?" grinned Buck.

"You heard me tell about the run-in I had, just before I quit the 7 Up. Time that Rimp Rollins, the foreman, busts in and won't let me shoot it out with his little pet."

"Shore I recollect it," said Buck. "What of it?"

"Well, the 7 Up spread is loading beef. I seen Rimp Rollins in town, and I got a idea that this Smilin' gent is still with 'em. If the Kid sees me, he'll take to the tall grass. I aim to lie low, and let you scout some, and find out if he's in town."

"How am I goin' to know him?" asked Buck.

"Easy enough. He's six foot, round-

way, I don't want to meet that Kid on the street. These policemen are too dang nosey. Locate him. Then I'll meet him in a saloon or a dance hall, have it all over, and be gone before the city marshal and them know what's happened. I don't let no horse-wrangler and cook's helper run it over me, and get clean away with it."

Speed disappeared, and Buck Deal set out on his search. It was easy enough for him. He was a stranger in that part of the country. He drifted over to where Rimp and his men were loading steers, and sat on the fence to watch. He was not long locating the Kid, and made no mistake. Next, he edged up to Rimp Rollins, who looked him over, and knew what he was.

"Mister Rollins, aincha?" said Buck.

"Yes, Rimp Rollins," replied Rimp.

"Need any hands? I been working for the Lazy Loo, over in the Sweetwater country. I was just working sorty extra until they shipped the beef. They shipped yesterday, and I got let out. Speed Doree is working for the Lazy Loo, and he said you might need hands."

"Did, eh?" said Rollins. "Well, I don't need any. Is Speed in town?"

"No. Him and the other boys put on a show last night, and pulled out for the ranch this morning."

There was a little more talk, and Buck Deal strolled back to find Speed, and tell the news. Rimp Rollins knew that the Lazy Loo beef had been shipped the day before, and was afraid that Speed was in

town. This news heartened him, and he saw nothing in the way of showing his men the kind of a time that they would enjoy. So, he put his heart into the matter, as they clumped along the sidewalk in high heels and jingling spurs. The Kid, who was not accustomed to such jamborees, kept close to Rollins, and Rimp grinned as he said:

"Well, fellers, here's where we initiate the Kid. I aim for him to see the elephants and the monkeys, and find out what the waddies out in this country does for fun."

It was almost midnight. Speed had seen Rimp Rollins and his men half a dozen times, without being seen himself. They were keeping in a bunch, and that didn't suit Speed. Gradually, Rimp's men dropped out. Some set into poker games, some went to dance halls, and what not. Only Rimp and the Kid were left.

"Well, Kid," yawned Rimp Rollins, "if you ain't seen no game that you want to play, we better go into this saloon, take a little night cap, then go on to the hotel and go to bed. I ain't as young as I was. Ain't the man I used to be, and don't reck'n I ever was. Anyway, I got too much sense now to stay out all night."

They pushed open the swing doors of a big saloon, and entered. There was no one in the place but the bartender and a sleepy porter. They approached the bar, and ordered drinks.

Speed Doree and Buck Deal were standing in the shadows across the street when Rimp and the Kid entered the saloon.

"Here's where it happens," said Speed. "I had to wait a long time, but here's where I square it with that Smilin' gent. He won't laugh at nobody when I get through with him. We just come out of that saloon. They ain't nobody but them in there. Come on."

Rimp and the Kid had just poured their drinks, when the door opened, and two men entered. The Kid was watching that door. It seemed that he was always watching.

"Look out, Mr. Rollins," he said, in a low tone. "Don't you mix into this. I don't want you to get hurt on my account."

"What do you mean?" asked Rimp. The next moment he saw the Kid set his glass on the bar, without drinking, and coolly turn around with his back to the bar.

Speed Doree and his partner came on and stopped near them. Rimp turned around and saw Speed.

"Hullo, Speed," he greeted. "Join us, you fellers."

"No," snapped Speed. "I don't need any of yo' drinks. I got business with this pet of yo'n, and it's personal business. Best you can do is to stay out of it."

"Now, see here, Speed," said Rimp. "You better let me talk some. I kept you from getting killed one time, and—"

"That's what you tell," snarled Speed. "I don't want any trouble with you, Rimp, but this is one time that you keep out of my business, or you'll wish you had."

The Smilin' Kid stood with his back to the bar, and his elbows on the rail. That wonderful smile was still on his lips, and in his eyes was that hurt, surprised expression, as he said:

"Hold on, Speed. Don't make me kill you. I don't want to do it. If you would just let me explain—"

"You can't explain nothin' to me," snarled Speed. "I know too much already. I told you one time I was going to knock that damned grin off'n yo' face, and I would of done it then, if Rimp hadn't busted in. I aim to do it, now." Speed's hand was right over the handle of his gun. The Kid's elbows still rested on the bar rail.

"Don't start anything, Speed," pleaded the Kid. "I don't want—"

"What you want, or don't want, don't make one damn little bit of difference to me," snapped Speed. "Either straighten that damned mug of yours, or I'll straighten it for you."

"Speed," said the Kid, his eyes narrowing and going hard, "they ain't no use in you gettin' kilt. You are insulting me for something that I can't help. If you do it again, I'm going to kill you."

"Oh, y'are. How do you like this one. You are a damn, yaller saddle-tramp, and you can't get out of this by playing that you got something the matter with you besides what ails you." Speed's hand was on his gun now. He really meant to abuse

the Kid, and thought he had his victim bluffed. Rimp saw the devils in the Kid's eyes, and broke in with:

"Take yo' hand away from that gun, Speed, you damn fool. Don't you know—"

Speed's gun came clear of the holster. The Kid's hand moved like lightning. His gun roared. Speed had fired also, but he was as good as dead when he pulled the trigger, and the bullet passed harmlessly into the front of the bar. Then another shot was fired. Buck Deal had jerked his gun and sent a bullet through the Kid's body. As the Kid fell, his gun roared one last time, and the bullet tore through Buck's head.

"Hey! What's going on in here?" roared the City Marshal, as he ran into the saloon.

"Looks like a little killin'," replied the bartender.

Rimp Rollins had run to where the Kid lay, and raised him up. The Smilin' Kid stiffened in his arms. When Rimp laid him down, there was a tear on the cheek of the rough old foreman. The City Marshal came up and looked the dead over. When he came to the Kid, he said:

"The Smilin' Kid. I got a picture of him in my pocket. He's thirty year old, and looks like twenty, and he's wanted more places than Santy Claus. He's got him a man for every year he lived, and takes two with him as he goes out."

"Maybe so," said Rimp Rollins, in a husky tone, "but he was driv to this killin'. I got a idea he was driv to the others by fellers that didn't know him. He was one good hombre, and wanted to do right. He gets the best funeral that the 7 Up can pay for."

And so, still smiling, even in death, they carried the body out. In a corner of the cemetery where many a tough hombre lay in his last bed, there still stands a low marble slab, with the words:

The Smilin' Kid,
He Was Good to the Last Drop,
and Dropped with a Smile.

WALKING DOWN WILD HORSES

Strange as it seems to one not familiar with the tricks of the "mustangers," some of the most superb of wild horses were literally "walked down" and captured.

The mustangers were usually queer, silent men who felt a close kinship to horses and animals of all kinds. They usually worked in groups when capturing an imperious stallion which had haughtily defied capture and outrun all pursuers. Stationing themselves along the portion of the range favored by the animals—either on horseback or on foot—they kept their quarry constantly on the move, endeavoring never to scare the animal into running long distances.

Hour and hour, night and day, they systematically, unrelentingly, pitilessly denied the harried animal a moment of rest or a drop of water. Sooner or later the horse became so terrifically exhausted as to make only feeble attempts to avoid a thrown rope. Usually the process was one of hours only, although such a chase has been known to last two or three days. Horses caught in this fashion were usually the cream of the wild herds, those brutes which had been too clever to be captured by other manner of traps.

The Cactus City Department

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THIS SOUNDS LIKE A LIE TO YE ED.

Hackamore Henry Reports Strange Occurrence for Sheepherders to Swallow

Hackamore Henry comes to town telling of how he lost his top horse over in the Rolling Dunes Country at the west edge of the desert. I'm going to tell it just like Henry told me, so you can use your own judgment.

One evening as Hackamore was fixing to make a dry camp, he noticed that the sky looked bad, so he figured that a Santy Anna would be blowing up. In order that his horse wouldn't drift with the wind, why he ties it to a seedling pine about six foot high, then rolls up in his soogans and goes to sleep.

During the night the Santy Anna blew up all right enough, and it blew like hell. Hackamore was rolled around considerable by the force of the wind, and when daylight come he woke up in a different spot than when he went to sleep.

He wasn't surprised very much as he knows how those winds can change the looks of the country just overnight, which is why it is named Rolling Dunes. But when he starts hunting around for his horse, he can't find it anywheres. He can't even find the little pine seedling it was tied to. The only tree nearby is a full-growed pine about forty feet high, so Hackamore knew he must be blowed farther than he had calculated.

Just as he was heading out to search for his cayuse, he happened to look up at the top of this tall pine, and there was his horse tied to the top of it with a halter rope. Only after a right smart bit of figuring was he able to deduct that some previous storm had covered

(See next col.)

PERSONALS

If anybody sees a spavined, rheumatic, wind - blown, scabby, petered-out looking skunk around town, don't shoot it because it may be the editor of the Mesa Springs *Tribune* who is paying a visit to Cactus City.

—

The Mex residents of Little Tijuana, on the down wind side of town, have a new hero on their hands. The chances are that by sundown he will be a dead hero, because he didn't have sense enough to turn and run when he was alive and had the chanct. This vaquero got pretty well gored up when the Mex decided to put on a amateur bull fight. The idea was all right, but the damn greasers got hold of a cow instead of a bull. I guess they don't know that a cow, unlike a bull, keeps her eyes open when she charges.

—

Solo Seton didn't die after all from the effects of a prescription which Judd Ovitt made up at his drugstore. And I want to assure you folks that it wasn't Judd's fault that Solo was almost stricken to death. Judd filled the prescription just as good as he could make out Doc Donnelly's handwriting, though at the time he thought it was kind of funny to feed strychnine to a sick man.

(See next page)

up that pine to look like a seedling, and then last night's storm had come along and blew all the sand away agin — leaving Hackamore's top horse up in the air to die of strangulation.

Well, that's Hackamore's story, and either you can believe it or you can remember that Hackamore is one hell of a liar who has never give Geo. Washington no competition for telling the truth.

NO JEWEL MINE IN CACTUS CO.

Mystery of Where Chicken Found Bright Stones Settled

The great Jewel Excitement is now over, so all you folks might just as well settle down to an honest living again (I mean those of you who make an honest living), because none of you is going to get rich by discovering the ruby and sapphire and diamond mine which everybody has been trying to discover recently.

In the first place, there ain't no ruby and sapphire and diamond mine. And in the second place, they wasn't real rubies, & etc., anyways. I mean the jewels which Mrs. Maverick Moore found in the craw of the chicken she was butchering for Sunday dinner. After some very feverish prospecting around for the place where the chicken had found the gems and ate them, it was discovered that this chicken had got into the tack room of the Moores' barn and had pecked all the imitation rubies, etc., off of Maverick's fancy chaps, and had ate same.

As usual, there is a moral to such a incident. If Maverick hadn't got hisself married awhile back, all this excitement could have been avoided. Nobody but a spineless, weak-kneed, hen-pecked husband would have to hang his chaps out in the barn. (I understand that Maverick, the damn fool, even has to dust off his boots and pick the fox-tails out'n his pants before he can get into his own house.)

IN MEMORY

Wool Wilson's dog, Shep, was a fine dog as far as he went—but he went too far when he tried to kick an editor. I shot him.

EDITORIAL

Too many people has been making too many remarks about too many things that ain't any of their danged business in the first place.

They say that hot lead is the only cure for this awful disease of people sticking their noses into somebody else's business, and I'm telling you that a whole lot of people is going to get the cure if they don't quit passing malicious gossip and slander about yours truly.

I refer to all this behind-the-back talk about me and the Widow Widdemer. When I called on her Monday night, it is a lie that somebody saw me sneaking home away past midnight. I was in bed at that time.

And on Tuesday I didn't give her a dollar box of candy which I bought at Judd Ovitt's drugstore. I ate it myself.

And it is false and untrue, positively, that the Widow Widdemer's departed husband left her ten thousand dollars worth of insurance money. I know that for a fact, because she told me so herself last Wednesday. Furthermore, I ain't seen her since that time (Wednesday) and I don't intend to call on her again, so I don't want to hear no more of this gossip about her and me.

And it ain't only me who has a kick coming. Gossip is liable to be hashed up about anybody. Take the case of T-bone Tillie, for instance. Is it anybody's business but her own that she has been fanning around in fancy clothes which she sure as hell didn't buy out of her salary of $5 a week and found? No, it ain't! And people ought to be ashamed of theirselfs for linking up her name with that traveling salesman who comes to town every week. I'll bet they are wrong anyway. Personally, I'll lay two to one that the clothes-buying gent is none other than a local citizen who is a horse trader. (Not mentioning any names.) I got plenty of reason for thinking so, but because I am not one to spread malicious gossip and slander, I won't tell those reasons—unless I get a bet out of some of you gents on it.

THIEF NOT GUILTY

Saddle Stealer Gets by With Alibi

In court last Monday Roan Rhodes was declared to be plumb innocent of the crime which was charged up against him. It was Pinto Perkins who swore out the warrant against Roan, claiming that Roan had stole a saddle from Pinto.

After listening to the evidence, Judge Jameson decided that there was no criminal intent, despite the fact that the saddle was found in Roan's barn. The judge agreed with Roan's theory that no doubt a pack rat had carried the saddle over from Pinto's place.

Proud Papa Gets Pulled Up Short

Ever since his wife had a baby, Kokomo Kingsley has been prancing around town like an unbroke horse. He is about the proudest pa that has ever plagued the public, and he can't talk about nothing else. The other day he cornered Ol' Hardrock, just in off'n the desert, and he gave the prospector a cigar and right off started jawing about his offspring.

Ol' Hardrock listened to the palaver, then wanting to appear polite and interested he remarked, "Bawls like a bull, I s'pose?"

"No," answers Kokomo, evidently misunderstanding. "It's a girl."

PERSONALS

T-bone Tillie is still keeping up her good work at the Longhorn Cafe and Lunch Counter de Luxe by making everything easier for everybody. On the menu of every meal now, there is hamburger steak. This is for the benefit of Pop McCoy and other gum-chawmpers who sometimes forget to bring their eating teeth with them.

—

Hank Norton, the railroad agent, wishes to notify the public of a change in the train schedule. On and after the 5th of this month, the 8:45 train will be at 9:15. That is the official announcement, but I guess it won't make a hell of a lot of difference. The train probably will continue to arrive along about eleven o'clock.

(See next col.)

UTAH'S QUESTION IS PLUMB EMBARRASSING

Timmons Has No More Morals Than A Sheepherder

Utah Timmons the other night practically cinched the championship for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time—or maybe for saying anything at any time. He is just like a hammer-headed horse which can't get within a mile of a bob-wire fence without getting tangled up in it. Only with Utah it is words which tangles him up—words and a total lack of social direction.

Anyway, the other night a bunch of citizens and their wives got together for an evening of card playing, and after the game busted up and the usual pie and coffee was served, the gathering of ladies and gentlemen got to asking riddles. It was good clean fun with much hilarity for all—until Utah opened his gabber.

"What is it," he suddenly blurts out, "that a man does standing up, a woman does settin' down, and a dog does on three legs?"

Now, offhand that don't look like something which ought to be said in mixed company, and there was a heap of blushing among the females and some funny looks on the gents' faces. But Utah didn't seem to notice and he kept asking if they give up, which everybody didn't want to do. Finally though, Utah eases the situation with the answer: "Shakes hands."

It just goes to show what a person's mind will think of.

TRUTHFUL TOMBSTONE

On the pine board which is stuck up over the newest grave in the Cactus City Cemetery, some truthful gent has wrote:

Here lies what's left of Six-car Steve.
His ticket to hell was a ace up his sleeve.

LEAD LAW IN SMOKE-TOWN

A SIX-SHOOTER RUCKUS, WHEN TWO PARDS RECKONED

by J. E. GRINSTEAD

If you ever ran two blocks to catch a train, grabbed the last coach while it was moving, let your foot slip, bit your tongue, and finally scrambled on, you know how High and Short felt when they tied up with Old Shep Latty's trail outfit. Then, when you got on the train, if you ran into two crews of Irish railroaders, fighting all over the place, you know how they felt *after* they got the job.

Shep Latty needed hands, because the trail was unhealthy that spring. A dozen of Latty's men had been killed since the herd started, and the drive was only as far as the Brazos, and waiting for that river to run down, when Latty took the two drifters on. The Old Man looked them over, and growled to himself:

"If I weren't short-handed, with hell in front of me, and every sheriff in Texas behind me wanting my hands, I'd let them two ride on, but I got to have hands, and the only kind I can get this spring is the scrapin's of hell. If I can get this gang out of Texas, or get 'em all kilt, the state ought to pay me a million dollars. It would cost that much to ketch all of 'em, and put 'em in the pen, where they belong."

HIGH AND SHORT IN A RIP-ROARING COMPLETE NOVELETTE OF STRONG MEN'S DANGER AND COURAGE

Old Man Shep was watching High and Short as the drifters wolfed their meat and beans in the rain. There was reason for his opinion of these two new hands. They were ragged, dirty, long of hair and

GUNS HOT AND SMOKING, CAME LIKE DOOM'S THUNDER THEY WOULDN'T OBEY THE KING OF THE TEXAS TRAIL

With hell's flames roaring at their backs High and Short poured lead from the door into their attackers

whiskers, and gone to seed generally. Old Short was walking on the sides of a pair of run-down boots that looked as if they might last another week, if he were very careful. High wore a hat that had so many holes in the crown his hair was sunburned.

When they had fed, and Old Shep had watched them without comment, he told

them to go to the remuda and rope out saddle strings. They knew very well what that meant. They were going to take the leavings from the free bunch, and they did. Old Shep Latty was a chinchy old rascal. He had bought a lot of halfbreeds, because they were cheap, and the reason they were cheap was that nobody would ride them, if he didn't have to do it. They were big, rangy fellows, good horses all right, but their ears both came out the same hole in the top of their heads, and they didn't have as much sense as a chipmunk—except to run, and pull other raw stunts.

High and Short went into their saddles at the same time, and their mounts went into the air at the same time. There was not a stunt that those spoiled horses didn't know.

Old Shep Latty was standing at the camp, watching the performance through the drizzling rain. He saw things happen to those horses that had never happened to them before. They got rode all over. The fight was short. The outlaw horses soon found that it was either get ridden or killed, and they gave in.

"Dam'fi don't believe them's trail hands, after all," grinned Old Man Latty. Then he swore horribly. Something had happened down there at the remuda. The trail boss jumped for his horse, and galloped down there.

What had happened was just a little matter. Two men had ridden up to the remuda. They were not together, but came from opposite directions. When they got within fifty feet of each other, one of them snarled:

"Hey! I told you to ride from here. They ain't room in this little spread for you and me both."

That was all that High and Short heard, for they had just got their old sunfishers to earth, and were trying to get a good, deep breath, with all that meat and beans in the way. Two shots crashed, and both the men went from their saddles.

High and Short were looking on in astonishment, when Old Man Latty rode up and jerked his mount to a stop.

"Hey!" he yelled. "What the hell did you two tramps kill them fellers for? I taken you on because I was short-handed, and now you put me right back where I was."

"Why, Mister Batty," said Short, "we didn't kill them gents. We was too busy tryin' to stay on top of these here sunfishers, to shoot anything. Them gents shoots theyselfs."

"Shot themselves?" bawled Old Man Shep. "What do you mean?"

"He means they shot each another," grinned High. "Short ain't got much sense, and he don't speak English good."

"Huh," grunted Latty, as he rode up and looked the dead men over. "Red and Brazos, two of the best hands I had. I heard 'em have some words at camp this morning, but there wasn't no smokin' talk that I heared. Reck'n they must have had a few more words afterwards. Any way, they are dead. Go on to the herd, and let a couple of the boys come in and eat. All hands has to stay on watch, day and night. This is the damndest mess I ever seen. If the cattle ain't running, somebody is stealing 'em." The old man swung his arm to indicate where the herd was, and the two drifters rode from there.

"I reck'n we can take our pick of directions," grinned High. "The Old Man just swung his arm, like a woman throwin' a empty bottle at a hen scratchin' the garden."

"I reck'n he thought we had sense enough to find a herd of steers in the wide-open outdoors," growled Short. "You told him I didn't have much sense, but I got that much."

"All right," said High. "You are so dang smart, lead the way. If we find 'em, we'll have to hear or smell 'em, we can't see a hundred yards for this mist and rain."

"Hiram," said Short, mournfully, "I feel some better after that feed but I'm right homesick. If all the gents in this trail outfit is as fast with they guns, and as willin' to use 'em, as them Red and Brazos was, this ain't no place for two innocent boys like you and me. Let's circle back to the remuda, get our own braunks, and escape from the wrath to come."

"Nope," said High, sadly. "Might be

that you could go back home, but I can't. Last year, I didn't have no job, and I went home, over in east Texas. The Old Man put me to pickin' cotton for my board. Then when the cotton was out, he put me to herding razor-back hawgs on the mast, and killin' cotton-tail rabbits for fresh meat, because the hogs wouldn't be big enough to kill for two more years. So, come spring, I got mad and quit.

"Well, come to think of it, I can't go back home, either," said Short. "I might could got along with my Old Man a while longer, but when you comes there, he takes me out and says if I'm goin' to associate with a half-grown damned badger, I better ride. So—"

"Hold the deal," snapped High. "You done lied enough. Where's that herd you was going to find? It shorely ain't five mile from camp, and we have came dang nigh that far—if we ain't been riding in a circle in this mess of weather."

"Oh, I'll find the herd. I could find 'em in the night time, with my eyes shut. They—Look out! You'll ride plumb into it in this fog."

They had found a herd, all right, and four men were sitting their horses in a close group, when the two drifters rode up to them. One of the men was an oldish fellow, with a lot of whiskers, and a hard eye. As a matter of fact, he was Gid Westfall, trail boss of that herd, and he roared out, as the two drifters pulled up:

"Who the hell are you, and what for?"

"Why, we are two new hands that the Old Man hired. He sent us out here, so's a couple of you fellers could come in and eat something, before you starve to death."

"What Old Man?" bellowed Westfall.

"Why, Old Man Shep Latty, of course."

"What did that damned old thief send you to my herd for?" roared Gid. "I know. He thought you might pick up a little bunch of stragglers, and hide 'em in that big herd. Get away from here, before—"

"Hold on a minute, pardner," begged Short. "We are new hands that just signs on, and we don't—"

"Ride, I tell you," yelled Gid. That was not all he did. His gun flashed out, roared, and the bullet fanned Old Short's face.

The next second there was more smoke around there than could settle to the ground. Some of it had to stay up in the air until the weather cleared. High and Short accepted the invitation, and in about four seconds, one man was down, two others had retired for emergency treatment, and Gid Westfall was following them. High and Short wheeled their mounts and rode from there. They didn't know where they were going, but they meant to leave that place. By chance, they rode into Latty's herd, when they had ridden two miles. Old Shep Latty had got to the herd. The rain had let up, and he was looking at the river, when he saw them and rode to them.

"Where the hell you two tramps been at?" he demanded.

"Why, I reck'n we missguessed the direction, and went to the wrong herd," grinned High. "We finds a herd, but four gents stops us, and talks sorty rough."

"What did they say?"

"Why, one gent said he was boss of that herd, and that you was a damned old thief. Then they opens on us."

"Opened on you, did they?" said Shep. "What did you do?"

"We smoked with 'em, some, and then we rides right smart."

"Oh, you did? Did they follow you, when you started to run?"

"No, sir. One of 'em fell off'n his horse, and the others went to get somebody to help 'em pack him in."

"Now, see here," growled Shep Latty. "I don't know whether you two are a coupla bob-cats in disguise, or just a coupla lucky dang fools, but I'm putting you on notice to stay away from Gid Westfall's herd, unless you got plenty more with you. Gid is a dang liar. This is a honest herd what I got. I buys these steers, except maybe a few that gets into the herd by accident, as we comes up the trail. If everything that Gid has stole on this drive was

took away from him, all he would have left would be his chuck waggin and one mule."

"He must be a right nice man," said Short.

"Yes," snapped Shep Latty. "I wish you had kilt the old hellion. He's been trying to horn in ahead of me all the way up the trail. I beats him to the crossing and throws my herd right in agin the river at the trail. He wants to get ahead of me, and let his steers eat all the grass in a mile of the trail. The river is falling. We'll have to cross in the morning, if we got any herd left. Gid Westfall and them killers of his'n will stompede us tonight, if they can. All hands will eat and get on the lower side of the herd. The steers won't run, if we can keep that outfit off. Just ride herd here, and keep yo' eyes open. It's about two mile down the river to Gid's herd, but them outlaws of his'n can come up here. If they do, kill as many as you can, before they get you."

"That shore sounds pleasant and reasonable," grinned High, as Old Man Shep rode on around the herd. "He don't worry as much about a trail hand gettin' killed, as he do about gettin' aig on his vest."

"Hiram," said Short, "this is a cruel and unfriendly world. Old Man Shep ain't got no heart or soul, and I'm afraid you and me made this Mister Gideon Westfall mad at us a while ago. We are tied up now, and all we can do is just watch the thing until it busts in our faces."

Night came on. All of Shep's men were placed below the big herd. It had quit raining, and a few stars were out. Latty placed his men well away from his own herd. High and Short were sitting their horses at a considerable distance from the others, when all of a sudden a gun cracked, and the bullet screamed close to them. That shot started a fight. In a few minutes it was scattered all over the place, as little groups of Latty's men engaged groups of the enemy. Suddenly, two men dashed by High and Short, headed straight for Latty's herd. They understood that move. Those men were to stampede the herd, while the others fought. Like a flash, the two drifters were after those flying men. The long-legged half-breeds that High and Short rode were going strong, and gaining at every stride. Quarter of a mile from the Latty herd, there was a deep wash. It was pretty close to the herd for shooting, but nothing else could be done. This was a war, and it had to be won. High and Short opened on the two men, just as they reached the bank of the ditch. Men and horses went down the bank together. The partners pulled up and listened. There was not a sound, except the distant cracking of a gun from time to time, as Shep Latty and his men carried the battle farther and farther away. The fact was that Gid Westfall had seen his two men start to stampede Latty's herd. That was all he wanted, so he finally turned with his men, and tore away toward his own outfit.

"High," said Short, "we had orto told them two gents that ditch was there. I'm afraid they falls in there and gets hurt. Let's look 'em over, and see."

There was not much to be seen by the dim starlight. The two horses, both crippled when they fell, had gone over a ten-foot bank, and broken their necks. The men had been dead when they fell.

"Short," said High, as he looked at the horses. "Them gents pack long-handled guns, that they can reach with. Well, they won't need 'em any more, and we might."

A few minutes later, High and Short sat their horses at a trail crossing on the draw, a hundred feet above where the two men had gone into it.

"Hiram," said Short, "a little bank like that is a friendly thing when bullets is prowling around. I reck'n we better stay here, until we see what happens out there."

"Shore," said High. "We might be in the way when Old Man Shep and the boys starts back. They are apt to be in a hurry, an— Oh-oh. Listen. Somebody is coming, now."

The fact was that the battle had ended because Westfall and his men, thinking that the herd would be stampeded, had quit the field. Old Shep Latty had taken stock of the fight, and growled:

"Damnedest fight I ever seen. All that lead wasted, and nobody killed on ary side.

We are all here except them two drifters that signs on today, and I reck'n they run clean out'n the country on them race stock they ride. They— Look out, in the draw. Get 'em fellers. They are fixin' to stompede the herd."

Horses were jerked to a stop, and guns clicked in the darkness. The two drifters understood the movement, and High yelled:

"Hold on, gents. This outfit is already short-handed, and besides, we are too young to die."

"Well, I'll be damned," snorted Latty. "What are you two doin' in that hole."

"Why, some bullets was whining around out there on the prairie and we thought that if they couldn't see no better than what we could, in the dark thataway, one of 'em might run into us. So, a coupla gents passed us, coming this way, and we follered 'em. I reck'n they didn't know this draw was here, and they runs into it and, and gets hurt—"

"Shut up that damned nonsense," snapped Latty. "Where is them two gents?"

"Down the draw about a hundred foot. They missed this trail, I reck'n."

Old Shep Latty and some of the others dismounted and went to where the men lay. Latty struck matches and looked them over.

"Huh," he grunted. "They are both shot up like a second-hand firecracker. I reck'n they shot theyselves, or one another, too."

"Might," said Short. "We weren't clost enough to see what they was doing when they went into the ditch. They might been aimin' to shoot they crippled braunks, and shot one another."

"Very likely," growled Old Man Shep. "Anyway, they are dead. If they had got to that herd, and nobody there, them steers would been half way to hell by now. Get to the herd, boys. Two of you go to camp at a time. Eat enough to run you a coupla days, and then get fresh mounts and come back. I aim to cross that river at daylight. When Gid Westfall counts his hands, he's going to be sore."

The men scattered around the sleeping herd. Old Man Shep Latty rode for camp, to see that none of the men stayed there too long. As he jogged along the muddy trail, he mused:

"I thought I'd saw all the trail hands in the world, but them two has got me stumped. They swore they didn't kill Red and Brazos, and I believed 'em, but since they lied about that killin' in the draw, no tellin' what they done. Well, if they just keep goin' like they are, and one of 'em don't take a notion to kill me, I can make out. Rate they are going, Gid won't have no spread in a week."

The sun came up fine and bright next morning. Something had given Mr. Westfall a distaste for fighting, for the moment, and his big herd lay quietly in a bend of the river, while Latty's herd swam the still swollen river, and stretched out across the prairie. But Gid could bide his time. As he saw that long spotted snake wind out onto the divide between the Brazos and Red River, he said:

"Let him go, damn him. I'll get him in a jam, yet. Plenty can happen between here and Dodge."

Old Shep Latty had said, earlier in the game, that he had "hell in front of him." He didn't know how true that was. There was something in front of him that was worse than the toughest hell that he had ever dreamed of. He had also said that every sheriff in Texas was after that tough gang of hands he had. Before long, he was going to think he had a mighty nice bunch of men—except the two drifters, who were always scared to death.

Latty's herd walked off and left Gid Westfall's outfit. Latty didn't know it, but Westfall had some news that he had not heard, so Gid just stayed where he was, with his cattle on good grass, and the river getting lower all the time. Latty got the news when he got within five miles of Red River, and it was that the river was a mile high, and might not run down for a month.

"DEAD OR ALIVE, WE CROSS AT DAYLIGHT"

So, he threw his herd on the best grass he could find, and got ready to wait with what patience he could muster.

Hell Boils Over

Old Shep Latty thought he was a wise old owl, and he was about a lot of things. His guess about men, and what they would do, was usually good, but he was about to make one mistake. He had been a trail hand, and had his boots full of mud and his throat full of dust. He knew how it helped to get off and go to town, get a few drinks, play some poker, and the like. He could see two big herds, one up the river, and the other down the river, waiting for the stream to fall, but he did not know that one of those herds was driven by Ike Westfall, a brother of Gid's, and that Gid's herd was just a second section of Ike's herd. He didn't know, either, that a man had ridden into Ike's camp the night before, and given him a message. It read:

> Dear Ike:
>
> I would of ketched up with you, like I said, before you reached Red River, but that damned old thief, Shep Latty, cut in ahead of me and helt me back. He has stole everything in reach of the trail, except the fences around widder women's milk pens. Shep's hands is a lot of thiefs and killers, like he is. Two of 'em, especial, he just brought on to kill everything in sight, except steers and grass. They can make more smoke than a tar kiln, and they's hot lead in it. I don't know they names, but you can't miss 'em. They are about eleven foot tall—that is, one of 'em is about seven foot, and the other one is about four—and they look like the skeer-crows in Pap's melon patch. If you don't get them two, we never will get these beef to Kansas.
>
> Gid.

Ike Westfall was the older of the two brothers, and had been running rough-shod over everything on that trail for several years. When he had read the message, he grinned in his whiskers, and said:

"Them two gents ought to be easy enough to find. It ain't polite to just ride up to a camp and pot a couple of trail hands. It might make Shep Latty mad at me. I'll see can I ketch 'em in Jotown. They's always plenty to quar'l about there."

When Old Shep Latty said he had hell ahead of him, he meant the usual rough stuff, Indian fights, battles with outlaws and rustlers, who infested the trail. Shep was no novice at trail-driving, but he had always gone up far to the west of the trail that he was now on, where there was plenty of room for everybody. But, that year the Comanches, Cheyennes and Arapahoes were on the prod, and he had swung east to miss their reservations. This was the first time he had ever crossed Red River at Jotown. At that point, the river was the dividing line between Hell and Texas, and if the river had not been there, the line would not have been noticed. Jotown was not as big as Paris or New York, but if as many men, in proportion to population, had been killed in those cities every day as were killed in Jotown, it would have been called a war, and burying details would have had to work nights.

The city of Jotown was not a city at all. It was just a jumble of houses and shacks, on the high south bank of Red river, and every kind of rough stuff known to cowmen and trail hands went on there. More than that, it was the dispensary of bust-head whiskey, to supply the outlaws who had congregated in the Indian Country, and they came over in hordes to get it, because no officer had the lack of discretion to try to take anybody in Jotown. So the place was wider open than two barn doors, and the season was never closed against killing, and all the other bad things that went with it. There were two stores, ten saloons, and half a dozen dance halls. Then there were shacks all over the place where private games were run, and a man would be killed for thirty cents.

There was a real hell ahead of Old Man Shep when he crossed the Brazos, and he didn't know it. Unaware that they were marked men in all that army of toughness that waited there for the river to run down, High and Short trotted into Jotown, along with Old Man Shep, and two of the other boys, Dee Flater and Babe Kinsley. Dee and Babe were side-partners, and plenty bad. They had looked back more than once since they left the coastal plain, to see if there a sheriff rode their trail. They all dismounted, in front of a likely looking saloon. Old Man Shep would take a drink

or two himself, and he had advanced the boys a little money, so they could pay for it. Shep was a thrifty soul.

"Hiram," said Short, as they looked the place over, "this is about the poorest place to get drunk that I ever saw. If a man can stay here ten minutes and get out alive, when he's cold sober, he'll be doing well."

"Shore," grinned High. "I ain't goin' to get drunk. The Old Man gives me only ten dollars, and that wouldn't pay for the bottle stoppers in a real drunk. 'Sides that, the looks of these gents in this town makes me want to hide behind something. It must be plumb lonesome in hell, without all these boys."

Old Man Shep led the way into the saloon. The only reason the saloons in that town had slatted swing doors was because it was fashionable. There was no one there whose sense of propriety could be shocked by looking into a barroom. The big saloon was full of men, in various stages of intoxication, and doing all the things that a lot of drunken toughs could and would do. A gun crashed at the back of the long room, just as Shep and his hands entered. There was a little stir back there, but a moment later glasses were clinking, and men talking, as if nothing had happened, while a couple of swampers dragged a dead man out the back door.

Midway the long bar, Ike Westfall and half a dozen of his tough trailers were taking some drinks, when Ike looked at the new comers, who had stopped between him and the door. Then he turned to Lem Tilson, who was sort of right-bower and lieutenant to Ike, and said in a low tone:

"That's Old Shep Latty. I never seen him, but I have had him described to me. It's agin the law to kill a trail boss, unless you have to, but no harm to trim his spread down until he can't move his herd. The first thing I want did is to get them two scarecrows that's with him. I mean the tall one and the little runt, that's on this side of Shep. Edge up that way, and see what you can do. Maybe one of 'em will step on yo' toe, or something, if you gets close enough."

High and Short had to line up at the bar, because Old Man Shep was buying the first drink himself, and they couldn't turn it down. Short, who was next to Westfall and his killers, pulled his drink short as he poured it, and when it struck his mouth he thought he had taken a chunk of fire instead of liquid. He grabbed a glass of water, and was raising it to his mouth, when Lem Tilson struck his arm, and knocked the water in his face. Ike Westfall and the rest of his killers were just behind Lem, and on the ready. Short had been watching that group, out of the corner of one of his big, gray eyes, and he knew that was no accident. The next second, Old Short's fist landed under Lem's chin, and the burly trailer hit the sawdust so hard he bounced once, and then lay still. Ike Westfall yelled, as he went for his gun:

"Here, you damned bush-horner, lay off my men."

Nobody in that mob was drunk enough not to know that lead was going to fly, and they sprang back away from the bar like a flushed covey of quail. Short still stood by the bar. High had swung out, facing Ike and his men. Ike fired, and the bullet cut through Short's collar, scorched Old Shep's whiskers, and went on about it's business. It had done no real damage, but some exemplary damages were going to be collected.

Old Man Shep and the two other boys, who were between him and the door, sprang into the clear to get into the game, but they were too late. High and Short were making so much smoke that they couldn't see to shoot. With two guns each, they swept the front of that bar. Lem was still down for the count, and the bullets flew above him. By some miracle, Ike Westfall gained the back door, and safety for the moment. Five of his men went down before that terrible blast.

When the smoke cleared, Lem was carried out the back, still limber. High and Short faced the bar, and Short said:

"Fill 'em up, gents, I missed that last one." Short was not a drinking man, but that was the only excuse he had to stay where he was, and he meant to stay.

"Right pleasant place," grinned High, as he poured a long one that time. " 'Minds me of one time some boys comes up out of the Neches bottom, to break up a dance, and—didn't."

Old Man Shep was eyeing his two drifters, with the mental note that he knew damned well those two men didn't fall in that ditch and kill one another, and he didn't believe that Red and Brazos had. Anyway, so long as they stuck to him, and helped him through with that herd, it was none of his business. He turned to Short, who was standing next to him in the realignment, and said:

"What did that gent have agin you, Short?"

"I don't know what he thought he had agin me," growled Short, "but he dang nigh had a slug of lead agin me. I got to get the collar of my shirt patched. I aim to see him first, next time we meet."

The bartender was idle for a moment, and Shep said to him:

"Who was that gent that opens on us?"

"Trail boss," replied the barkeep. "Name's Ike Westfall."

"Westfall," gulped Old Man Shep. "Anything to Gid Westfall?"

"Brother. Him and Gid works cattle together."

The bartender had a call farther along the bar. Old Man Shep wrinkled his nose, and muttered:

"Now, I reck'n I'll be damned. Wonder if Gid gets word to this brother of his'n to work on my men, and stop me. Well, I reck'n two can play at that game. I'm sorty short handed, but—"

"Excuse me, mister," said a big ruffian who had watched the little ruffle from a distance, "are you a trail boss?"

"That's what they call me," grunted Shep.

"Well, no offence ain't meant. Mostly, when herds crosses into that Injun country, they need some extra help. It's right rough and uncertain over there. They's about a dozen of us boys lookin' for a job, and—"

"Trot 'em out here, and let me look 'em over," snapped Old Man Shep. "I'm sorty short-handed, and it looks like I might need more help."

The big ruffian, whose name was Burl Otey, marshaled his squad, and Old Man Shep looked them over.

Some of them appeared to be ordinary cowhands, while others had the appearance of cultured gentlemen, with a mingled lot between the two extremes. The fact of the matter was that they were all outlaws, who had been caught on that side of the river by the rise, and wanted to appear to be working, in case rangers should make a raid on the town, or United States marshals should decide to look it over. Old Man Shep hired them, and then said:

"Well, this town don't seem to be a right healthy place. I reck'n we all better ride for camp."

They went out into the sandy street, and Shep and his four men stood waiting for the new hands to get their mounts.

"Mister Latty," said Short, "High and me ain't had drinks enough yet. You'll have plenty hands without us, and we'd admire to stay in this nice, pleasant town a while. We'll be ready when you start the herd acrost the river."

"Now, see here, Short," growled Old Man Shep. "I don't know much about you and High, but it seems like you are sorty on the kill. I got to tell you something. If this Ike Westfall has started in to trim my outfit to his size, he'll make it rough, and the best chance we got is to stay in a bunch, at our camp, until this river runs down."

"Oh, I reck'n that gent don't aim to homicide yo' whole spread," said Short. "If he do, maybe High and me can keep him so busy he'll forget it."

"You might do that," said Shep, thoughtfully. "Seemed like it was you that Ike was after. I thought it was a personal matter, but—"

"It is, now," said Short. "When a gent busts a cap in my face, I take it personal."

"Oh, all right," said Shep. "You can't stay in town a while without more money than what you got. Take this." Old Man Shep, chinchy as he was, shoved a roll of bills into Short's hand, then mounted and rode away toward camp with his men, leaving High and Short standing in the sandy

street. Old Man Shep Latty was making a gamble. He was simply backing High and Short to kill Ike Westfall, and he didn't give them nearly as much money as he thought it would be worth to him.

"Short," said High, "have you gone clean crazy?"

"No," snapped Short.

"Well, you shore act like it. Always before, you have said I was a hot-headed, high-tempered dang fool. You always acted like a parson or something, and wanted to run out of everything. Now here you are, fixin' to camp permanent, in the middle of hell."

"If you don't want to stay with me," growled Short, "you can go on and catch up with the Old Man."

"Oh, I don't aim to leave the party, just because I can't dance every set," grinned High. "But I got to tell you something. Don't you drink no more of that licker. It's got taggur claws in it. You ain't used to it, and it'll gotch yo' eyes. Besides that, it makes you act queer. I ain't never saw you like this before."

"No," growled Short, "and you ain't ever saw ary gent that I ain't been introduced to just walk up and snap a cap in my face, just because I knocked one of his killers down with my fist. I try to be kind and peaceable, but things like that makes me sorty cross. Come on. Let's go back in that hooch house, and wait for Mr. Ike Westfall. He seems to be looking for me, and I'd hate for him not to find me where he left me the last time he used me."

High shot a queer look at his partner, wondered if one drink of that fight-juice had gone to his head like that, and followed the rangy old puncher back into the saloon.

There were still plenty of men in the place, and they were having one hilarious time, but they had a wholesome respect for these two drifters, who crossed to the other side of the room from the bar, and sat down.

A few minutes later, a big puncher came in and stopped at the bar. The barkeep served him, and while he was pouring a man-size drink, he said:

"Did them two scare-crows that shoots up old Man Ike and the boys a while ago get out of town?"

"They don't look like it," obliged the bartender, jerking his head toward where the partners sat. "Do you want to speak to them about something?"

"No," snapped the puncher. "I just wanted to know whether they was in town."

"Ask them," chuckled the barkeep.

"You go to hell," snarled the puncher, then he downed his drink, paid and went out.

Five minutes later, that puncher was talking to Ike Westfall, as he and Lem Tilson, who had recovered from his nap, sat in a little room at the back of another saloon.

"Well, did you locate them killers?" snapped Westfall.

"Shore. They are over at the Trail Boss saloon, where you left 'em. I seen 'em, and they look like they was waiting for you to come get 'em."

"I'll get 'em," snapped Ike. "Gid writes me that Old Shep Latty imports them gents, to kill everything on the trail except steers and grass. If they'll just hang around a little while, until some more of the boys comes in, that's all I ask. The hand that brought me that note from Gid says them two killers has already got three of the best hands Gid had. That's plenty enough reason for me to get 'em. I'll show Shep Latty that he can't kill up my men, and get away with it."

Midafternoon, and no sign of Ike Westfall and his men. High and Short were getting restless, and it dawned on them that they were hungry. They rose and walked out into the street, just as about twenty men dismounted in front of that other saloon where Ike was making his headquarters. The partners saw the men.

One Drink Of Tiger Juice And Short Went Plumb Crazy For The Smell Of Ornery Killer's Blood.

but thought nothing of it. There were half a dozen trail outfits in reach of town, and they didn't know anybody.

On a side hill of the rough street stood a long, pine-board shack with a square front. The back end of the building was dug into the side of the hill, and the front was on high posts. Over the door was a sign of one word, written with tar, on a pine board. The word was "CHILLY." The partners stumbled up the rickety steps, and made across the wide porch door. Just as they entered, a gun crashed and the bullet passed over High's head and lodged in the door jamb. The partners went inside, without being invited.

"That gent is pretty good," grinned High. "He can hit a house. If he keeps on, he might hit a man."

"That was accidental," growled Short. "He couldn't do it again in a dozen shots."

They slid onto rough stools before the greasy counter, after closing the front door as a matter of precaution. A slatternly woman shoved two greasy glasses of water toward them, and took their order for chili and coffee. There were no more shots in the street just then, and the partners just supposed that some drunk had let his gun go off accidentally. The food was served by the woman, who stood back and leaned against the wall, as High and Short manned the spoons and went to work.

They had taken the second dip in the mess, when— *Wham!* A gun roared, the bullet came in at a window at the front end of the long counter, smashed High's bowl of chili, and sent a shower of the red liquid all over the place. The woman ducked behind the counter, as High said:

"Now look what that careless dang fool has went and did. He has plumb ruint my vest, and—

"Wham! Wham! Two more bullets skidded along the top of the counter. One took a glass of water, and the other carried a tin spoon on into the kitchen with it.

Two Devils in Hell

High and Short dropped from the stools to the floor, and the woman ran back into the kitchen, where her man was chief cook and chili mixer. The shooting stopped, momentarily, and a voice out in the street roared:

"Hey, Chili Joe! Take yo' woman and get out'n that trap. We aim to take them two killers, and you might get hurt."

Chili Joe seemed to believe the man who was talking. At any rate, he and his woman ran out a door to one side of the kitchen, and closed it behind them with a bang.

"Weren't no need to shut that door," chuckled High. "We ain't got hardly no business a tall out there right now."

"No," snapped Short, "and them gents ain't got no business in here. Come on. Let's get into the kitchen. We got a better chance back there."

They sprang through the opening at the end of the counter, and on into the kitchen. There was a big range against the partition wall. In a second they were down behind that range.

"Gosh!" High said, "this 'minds me how I used to sit on the woodbox behind Maw's old cookstove cool mornings, before Pap hauled up any wood for the fireplace. It's nice and pleasant in here."

"If them gents busts in here," said Short, "you are apt to be where they's more heat than you want. They— Look out!"

A perfect storm of lead tore into the front of the house. Bullets came through the partition wall, and overturned pots of chili on the stove. High and Short kept low behind their cast-iron breast works, and waited for the storm to pass. Presently, there was a lull in the firing, and then that same big voice roared:

"That's the idea. We cleaned them up, and now if Old Shep Latty thinks he can clean our outfit, let him run out some more of his killers. We'll drag 'em out, clean up the joint, and pay you for the damage in a little while, Greasy."

That big voice was Ike Westfall. With a little army of his own men, and assurance that there were no more of Latty's men in town, Ike was disposed to crow a bit.

He had no more than got the words out of his mouth, when that side door opened a crack, and a solid stream of fire and lead was thrown into his group of men. A dozen were hit, and two went down. Four guns had done that trick, with Short firing

from the top of the door, and High from the bottom.

Before Ike and the men he had left could fire a shot, the door was closed, and the two drifters were back behind that friendly cast-iron range.

"Hey, some of you fellers come help us take them two killers," Ike Westfall called to some men on the street.

"Go to hell," jeered one of the men. "It's yo' party, go ahead and dance. You had twenty men to two. That ought to be enough. If you had any more they'd be in the way, and somebody might get hurt."

"I never knowed we had any friends in Hell," grinned High, "but seems like that gent's one. We got about all we can handle right now, the way the weather is."

"We can handle all that can come in at that door," snarled Old Short, as he reloaded his guns.

"Yeah, while our cartridges holds out. Looks to me like I done followed yo' lead once too many."

"You can go out of here, if you don't like it," snapped Short.

"Yes, and a fish can jump into a frying pan, too, if he's dang fool enough to do it. Only chance we got is to hold 'em off until night time, and then make a sneak. It's almost night now."

High reached up and took a small pot of chili from the top of the big range, and a pot of coffee along with it. He took a chance on being seen while he grabbed two bowls and two spoons from a cupboard on the wall, and dragged a box of crackers behind the range as he returned. No one fired a shot at him. There was an ominous silence ouside the house, in the gathering dusk. They were eating chili and drinking coffee when High said:

"The gent that wrote that sign out front was all right. This joint is chilly. It's about the coldest spot I been in. I been shakin' ever since I comes in here. Still and all, it could be worse. We got something to eat. If I just had some canned peaches to taper off with—couple of cans would do—I could make out until them gents kills me. They —Listen!

Out there in the street that big voice was roaring again:

"We ain't got 'em yet, but we will get 'em. Just wait."

"Now, Hiram," said Short, whose anger had cooled a bit, and he was beginning to realize what a tight spot they were in, "what do you suppose that gent means?" He started this mess, and—"

"Shore," said High, "and it looks and sounds like he aims to finish it."

High was looking about the kitchen, and figuring on the chance of getting out of there alive, which was not very promising, with Ike Westfall and a small army of killers scattered about the wild old town. That old shack had known many tenants in the passing years. Greasy Joe, or Chili Joe, as the present proprietor was called, did not know all about the place, for he had moved into it less than a week before that.

High spied a peculiar looking section of the back wall. He didn't know that the house was dug into the high bank, and he thought they might loosen a board and get out that way. He began prying on that section with a meat cleaver that he found on a table, and to his surprise the section of wall, half as high as a man, and wide as a door, fell into the room. He peered at the opening, and saw nothing but darkness. The next moment he caught up a kitchen lamp, with a tin reflector, struck a match and lit it.

"Hey," snorted Short. "Aim to make a light for them killers to shoot by?"

"No," grinned High. "Just investigatin' a little." He flashed the light at that black spot, and the next moment he was gone. Presently, he came back without the lamp, and explained that there was a good, roomy dugout back of the house. He said he had left the lamp in there, in case somebody crowded them.

"All right," grunted Short. "You can go in there if you want to. I'll take my chance

in the open. Let's take a look out that side door."

They opened the door and peeped out the crack. Out there in the street were fully thirty men, and they had a big light.

"All right, fellers," bellowed Ike Westfall. "They are still in there, I seen a light when one of 'em lit a smoke. Wind them things up, and let 'em go. They'll be damn glad to come out in a few minutes."

Watching from the crack in that side door, High and Short saw what he meant. The front windows of the ramshackle old building had been shot out. As they watched, one of the men lit a ball of some kind, and as it flashed into flame, tossed it in at a broken window, with a roaring sound.

"Why, the damned varmints," snarled Short under his breath. "They aim to burn us like rats in a haystack. Get as many as you can, High. They ain't fitten to live." Four guns began spouting flame and lead from that door. Three more men went down, and others sprang out of the way, nursing wounds.

The two drifters had done damage, but it would do them little good. Two of those fiery balls had sailed into the old house. One was against the wall, behind the counter, and the wall on that side was already blazing.

"Now shoot, damn you!" roared Ike Westfall. "You goin' to find out what hell is like, before you get there, if you don't come out of there. If you do come out—Well, come on, and see what happens to you."

"Come on, Hiram," said Short, sadly. "We ain't fightin' humans, but let's kill as many as we can before they get us. Let's go out that side door, and face 'em, like men."

"Shut up, you long-laigged idjit," snapped High. "We ain't got as much business out that door as a cockroach has got in the pie for Sunday dinner. Double yo' self up and get through that hole." Together, they passed through into the dugout. High pulled the section of the wall in place, and they sat down on the ground.

"Well, Hiram," mourned Short, "I always knowed I'd come to some bad end, just for associating with you, but I never thought I'd ever crawl into hell and shut the door, like what we've done."

"Shut up," snapped High. "Who leads into the mess? You orto had sense enough not to take that drink of taggur's blood. You know dang well you ain't got brains enough to absorb good licker, let alone the fight-juice they gives out in this town. You are the one that gets a drink, swells up, and thinks we can whip the world. Dang yo' fool soul, I wanted to go on back to camp with Old Man Shep, but you wanted to stay. Said when ary man was looking for you, you aimed for him to find you. Well, them gents has shore found you, and—"

"Don't, Hiram," begged Short. "We ain't got but a few minutes to stay on earth. We been partners a long time, and I don't want that the last thing we do is to quarrel. Seems to me like—"

"Shut up, I tell," said High. "Listen!"

The fire had taken hold of the rotten old structure good by that time, and was roaring like a furnace. The flimsy partition wall had burned out like a cheap match. Peering over the section of wall, the drifters could see into the street through the gutted building. Scattered along the other side of the street was a small army of Old Ike Westfall's killers. As High and Short peered out the crack, breathing air that was hotter than any that they had ever felt in a desert, Ike Westfall yelled:

"They are yaller as hell. They won't come out. We got 'em. They can't stay in there and live."

Old Short eased one of his guns from the holster, poked it out the crack and let drive through the shimmering heat waves. He fired three times, but instead of killing Ike, as he hoped to do, the bullets went high into the tops of other buildings.

"We got 'em!" chortled Ike. "That was the fire exploding the ca'tridges in their belts. It's all over now."

The front of the old building had settled until it looked as if it were all set for a high dive to the other side of the street. It faced north, toward the river, and the street was below it. A sudden gust of wind came out of the south, the posts that held up the front of the house gave way, and with a

roaring, crashing noise the whole structure pitched into the street, floor and all.

A wild yell went up from Ike Westfall and his trailers, as they gave back from the avalanche of fire. The blaze was still mounting too high, and the smoke too thick, for them to see the side of the hill where the back of the house had been. Any way, they were no longer interested. The deed was done.

"All right, boys," called Ike. "that job's over. Them two gents thought they was bad. I reck'n they was. They was Two Devils in one Hell for a little while, but I reck'n they gone where they don't stand so high. Let's go get some drinks."

The gang swung away to a saloon, where Ike Westfall proceeded to make liquor flow like water in celebration of his victory. He had the two scare-crows out of his way, and now he would trim Old Shep's outfit until he would be the last man into Dodge with that herd of his.

An hour passed, while High and Short crouched in that hole. The fire gradually burned down, and the air in the dugout got a little more bearable. The section of wall had been scorched, but it still leaned against the opening into that hole-in-the-ground. High pushed the boards, and they fell over with a crash.

"Look out, you dang fool," growled Short. "Do you want to wake Grammaw before she gets her nap out."

"No," snapped High. "I don't want to wake nobody. What I want is to get out of this oven. I like my biscuits cooked good, but I don't want 'em too brown. My hair's singed, and my boots is beginning to crack. Come on, let's see can we get out of here."

Down in the street spots of fire still glowed in the ashes, but otherwise the night was shrouded in darkness as a fog settled along the river. The partners picked their way gingerly over the hot ground where the back of the house had been, and gained the street. Well away from the scene of their recent danger, they stopped in the deep shadows.

"Short," said High, "can you lead to where we left our braunks? I'm skeered so bad I don't know straight up."

"Shore I can," replied Short, "but I got to go to a store first. I'm all out of cartridges, and we are apt to need some."

"Ca'tridges, hell," snapped High. "All I need is a braunk under me and a open trail. I can do more good with that, right now, than I could with a plumb dang cartridge factory."

"Oh, shut up and come," growled Short. "No tellin' what we are apt to run into, between here and camp, and we got to have ammunition and things like that."

A little way down the street a yellow bar of light was doing its best to get out a door, in the face of the darkness and fog. They made for it, and found it was the front door of one of the stores.

There was just one man in the place. He was reading an old newspaper, as unconcernedly as if two men had not just been burned alive, within a few hundred feet of him. In fact, the citizens of Jotown did not get excited about little things like that. Battles between warring trail hands, factions of outlaws, bands of Indians and the like, were too common in that town to excite curiosity. The man looked up from his paper, and said:

"Something, gents?"

"A few cartridges," said Short. "Forty-fours."

The man went behind the counter, set down several boxes of cartridges. Short calmly broke open four boxes. He shoved two over to High, and began filling his own belts and pockets from the other two. When the boxes were empty, Short paid the man, and they went out. Outside the store Short led the way down the street.

"Hold on, Short," said High. "Our braunks ain't down that way."

"I know it," growled Short, "but that Trail Boss Saloon is, and I aim to get me one shot at the gent that starts this mess, before I leave town."

"Now, see here, Short. I sorty like a fool,

What Chance Have Two Men When All The Killers On The Range Take Their Trail With Six-Guns Smoking?

but I shore hate a *damn* fool, and you are goin' to turn to one in about a minute. You— Look out!"

High pulled Short back into the fog bank, and they stood still while a man passed them. The man went on and entered the store that High and Short had just left. He was the same big puncher who had gone to the Trail Boss Saloon to locate High and Short, earlier in the scrimmage, and then didn't want to talk to them.

"Got any cartridges?" he asked.

"A few," replied the storekeeper. "Coupla gents in here just now taken most of the .44's."

"Who was they?"

"Dam'fino. One of 'em was about seven foot tall, and the other one could just see over the counter good. They didn't talk none, and they looked like the breaking up of hard winter."

"The—devil—you—say," gasped the puncher. "Gimme ten boxes of forty-fives, quick." The puncher threw down the money, grabbed up the five hundred cartridges, and shot out the door. If High and Short had known his errand, they could have saved a lot of smoke, for he passed within a few feet of them as he hurried back to the Trail Boss Saloon with the news.

"Come on," said Short. "I'm going to have one more look for that Mister Ike Westfall. It may be agin the law to kill a Trail Boss on this man's trail, but I aim to get one shot at one of 'em."

They stumbled on down the street in the darkness. Meantime, the big puncher reached the saloon, and rushed up to Ike Westfall, who was at the bar, still celebrating his victory over the Two Devils that he had sent home.

"Hey, Ike," said the puncher, "we didn't get them fellers. They was in the store a little bit ago, and bought all the forty-fours in the house."

"Hell they did?" said Ike. "Why, that ain't possible. We burnt them two devils up, and they been back in hell a hour."

"No they ain't. Bunt Stokes describes 'em exact, and you know they ain't ary other two men on earth that looks like 'em. They are wild loose, right here in town."

"All right. Hey, fellers. We didn't get them killers. Here, fill yo' belts with ca'tridges, and let's go get 'em. We'll have 'em in the open now. A lot of you mount, and the rest go with me. Don't let 'em get to their braunks, and get out of town."

Six-Gun Roundup

High and Short were right across the sandy street, where there was a vacant lot, when Ike and his men came tumbling out the front door of the saloon. There was a single shot from the darkness. The bullet sped within an inch of Ike Westfall's head, and spatted into the wall behind him.

"Hold on, Short," whispered High. "Don't go clean crazy. What do you mean, bushing a gent thataway. He couldn't even see you."

"No," snarled Short, "and I couldn't see him when he was throwing all that lead and fire into that chili joint. I aim to get him, damn him."

But Short had no more chance to get the big trail boss, for he had jumped into the shadows, and gone wild right.

"Get 'em, fellers," yelled Ike.

The next moment a storm of bullets was sweeping that vacant lot, but High had dragged his crazy partner away from there. With bullets coming his way, shooting was another matter with High. He jerked both his guns as he ran, and from a point near the store began shelling the neighborhood. Short joined him. They couldn't see anything but gun-flashes, but there was plenty of yelling done by men their bullets found.

They were going strong, until some of Westfall's gunners located them. Bullets began to thud into the side of that store all about them, and they ran back along the side of it, and on around the back to the other side.

The fight went on for an hour, all over the place. High and Short would no more than find a place where they could do some good work, when Westfall's men would drive them out of it. It was almost morning, and the east was turning gray in spite of the fog.

"Short," said High, "our ca'tridges ain't goin' to hold out always, and when daylight comes them gents is going to take us. Let's get to our braunks, and ride off for camp."

"All right," growled Short, "but some day I aim to see this Ike Westfall, and talk things over with him. He— Listen. We got 'em on the run."

As they crouched in the shadows they could hear horses plunging as men mounted, and the thud of hoofs as they scurried out of town. Old Short chuckled. "Two Devils in One Hell, eh? We'll be here the next time you want to find us, Mister Westfall."

"No we won't," snapped High. "Dang yo' fool soul. Here's where I quit, unless you want to go with me. I aim to ride for camp, while I can."

Short made no further protest. They mounted and rode up through the deep cut out of town. There was no timber on the river at that point, except a few cottonwoods along its banks. Once above that high bank, they were in the satisfying wide open out of doors.

They had ridden quarter of a mile, when a gun spat, directly in front of them, followed by a dozen other shots from front, right and left. Ike Westfall had out-generaled his Two Devils. They were cut off from Old Man Shep's camp. Whirling their mounts, they tore back toward town, with bullets whining all about them as they went down through the cut.

There was no time to dismount, and seek safety. In fact, there was no longer any safety in Jotown for them. Ike Westfall had recruited all the thugs and outlaws in town, except the few that Old Man Shep had taken with him.

Right through the town, and on down the old trail, over which a million long-horns had crowded their way down to the ford, the partners flew. They meant to make a break where the trail turned, and escape into the willows along the stream, but a gun roared down the stream, showing that Ike Westfall really meant to get his Two Devils this time. They were completely surrounded.

The harried drifters turned with the trail, and sped on down to the water. The stream had fallen considerably, and the water was fairly smooth.

"Hiram, son," mourned Short, as they pulled their panting horses to a stop, "it looks like they got us this time. They seems to be a good deal more of them than what they are of us, and—" Short broke off. Up on the river bank, Old Ike Westfall was yelling.

"Come on, fellers. We got 'em this time. Close in on 'em, and pour it to 'em."

Guns began to crack, and bullets whined over the heads of High and Short, as Westfall's men shot high, from the top of the hill.

"Short," said High, "I think I'm goin' to like drownin' better than what them gents promises us. Come on."

High's spurs went in, and his rangy old half-breed went into the water with a splash. Short didn't wait, but followed suit. They had struck the current before Ike Westfall found out what they had done, and then he and his killers came storming down to the water's edge. It was growing light, and the fog was breaking in spots. One moment one of the swimmers would be in the open where Westfall could see him, and the next moment he would be blotted out.

"Pour it to 'em, boys," yelled Westfall. "Kill 'em before they drown. Drownin' is too good for 'em."

The old outlaw broncs swam low in the water, with just their heads out. They had drifted far down stream, when Westfall caught a glimpse of High, just as his horse floated up on its side, and the rider went into the water.

"We got one," chortled Ike Westfall, and— There goes the other one!" Short's horse, drifting down behind High, had rolled on it's side, and Old Short had gone off in the water.

"Fine!" bellowed Old Ike Westfall. "They don't never get so bad they can't be got. Now, we got Old Shep Latty's stinger pulled. We can just ride out there and take

him apart. When I get through with him, he'll be glad to wait until everybody else has gone on up the trail. Come on. Let's eat everything in town, and then ride for Shep Latty's camp. I got plenty to quarrel with him over. Them two devils of his'n have kilt up about half my hands."

So, Ike Westfall, sure that the game was now in his hands, took his men to town, fed them well, replenished the supply of ammunition, and set out to finish with Shep Latty out of hand.

Mr. Sheppard Latty, trail-boss extraordinary, was a gambler in the bottom of his heart. He had cheerfully bet a little money on High and Short to win. He had lost that bet, for they had not killed Ike Westfall, but Shep didn't know that. When his two pet killers had not shown up at camp before morning, he suspected that he had lost them. He couldn't be bothered about that, for he was already planning another gamble. Besides being a gambler, Old Shep Latty was one of the canniest trail-drivers in the game. He knew that it was safer, when the river began to fall and the water was smooth, to swim those big steers, than it was to wait and drive them over half a mile of quicksand bogs, when the water went down. So, at the very moment when High and Short disappeared in that giant whirlpool, with bullets spattering the water all about them, Old Man Shep was rousing all hands to get the herd moving. He would swim his herd and steal a march on the timid souls who were waiting for the river to run down, thus beating that long string of other herds to the market. Men mounted and spurred away into the fog, to start the big herd. Old Shep looked his new hands over as they mounted. They were a close-mouthed lot. Some of the old hands had grumbled, when they knew they had to swim the stream, but not a word was heard from the new hands. They seemed anxious to swim that swollen stream. Old Man Shep didn't know that they had a good many reasons for wanting to be on the other side of that red line between Hell and Texas, before any of the other big herds crossed.

"Now, boys," said Shep, as they were mounting, "I'm goin' to ride just ahead of the herd, and look out for dog-holes—and things. If anything starts, turn the herd wild loose, and come a foggin'."

Something started. The big herd was swinging along at a lively gait, after a good rest. Old Man Shep, a little way in the lead, was within a mile of Jotown and the river, when a band of horsemen came storming toward him from the town. He didn't wait for anything, but jerked his gun and fired three quick shots. He knew what was going to happen. Westfall was going to try to stop him, and he didn't mean to be stopped. Shep stopped, right in the front of his herd, and let them push him forward toward the oncoming riders.

"Hey, what the hell you doin', movin' them steers to the river?" yelled Westfall, as he pulled up. "Think you are goin' to block the trail, like you been doin' all the way up?"

"No," roared Old Man Shep. "I don't aim to block nothin'. I aim to swim these steers acrost, and go on about my business."

"You'll play hell. You'll get 'em all drownded."

"They are my steers," replied Shep. "I bought 'em, and paid for 'em. Didn't steal 'em, like some does."

"I don't give a damn how you got 'em," roared Ike, "you ain't goin' to block that river with dead steers, so's a decent trail outfit can't cross. Swing that herd around, and go on back to yo' bedding ground, if you don't want—"

"Why, Mr. Westfall," said Shep, with a queer grin, as he counted Ike's men, and knew his outfit could eat them, with the new hands to help, "yo're plumb impolite. You don't own this little old cowtrail. I aim to—"

"Stompede them steers, boys," yelled Ike Westfall. "I'll show this damned old thief whether I own this trail or not. Throw a skeer into 'em that'll take 'em clean back to the home range."

Guns began to roar, and the leaders stopped and began to stack up. Old Man Shep sat his horse, making no move for his gun. Suddenly. two bands of men swept around that herd, either of them equal to Westfall's band. They came fogging, all right, and smoking too.

Caught in a cross fire, with Old Man Shep's outlaws in the van, and trying their best to kill everything in sight, except the grass, Westfall's men went down in a jumble of dead and wounded men and horses. Westfall and half a dozen of his men won clear from the mess, and tore away toward their own camp.

In twenty-four hours, Ike's spread had been trimmed until he couldn't move his herd, unless he got more hands. The only consolation he had was that he had killed the Two Devils in One Hell, but that was not much, for Old Man Shep seemed to have plenty more of them.

Down through the red cuts and on through Jotown streamed the big herd. Old timers watched them in wonder. The man who had sold High and Short the cartridges, stood in the door and mused:

"Dangdest fool I ever seen. They's bubbles in the river this morning, and another rise is coming down. He'll get that whole blamed herd drownded, and his men with 'em."

But those steers didn't drown. The big, rangy long-horns breasted the flood, and fought their way across. Behind them came the chuck wagon. A dozen trail-hands had ropes attached to the wagon, and were helping to pull it across, while the team swam for all they were worth, and the darky cook on the seat showed more white in his eyes than there is in a Texas cotton patch. The wagon struck the sandy bank, the mules shook themselves, and dragged on across the long, sandy bar. Half way to the high bank, that "other rise" struck. The first wave put water knee deep where the wagon was. The men who had stopped to coil their wet ropes came storming through the flood, yelling like maniacs. The tired mules ran away, and dragged the wagon to high ground before the next wave struck.

The men who had pulled that wagon across were Old Man Shep's new hands, with the giant Burl Otey leading them. Out on high ground, they stopped in a close group, and Otey said:

"Fine! That shuts the door, good. There won't be another herd cross there in a week, and by that time it will all be over. The other boys will be in, and we'll put the deal through."

About the time that Old Man Shep was accusing Ike Westfall of being "plumb impolite," two bedraggled wrecks were sitting on an old cottonwood log, half a mile below the ford on the opposite side of the river from Jotown. They didn't look like anything that, or any other turbulent stream had ever cast up, but they were High and Short. Their two old half-breeds were browsing a clump of willows a little way from where the partners sat. When Ike Westfall thought he saw them go down, they had just struck a big whirlpool. They both had won out, and in a few minutes were on the bank.

"Hiram, son," said Short. "I always knowed that you was born to be hung, and now I reck'n we both was. We have missed more chances to be kilt natural than ary other two trail-hands that ever lived."

"Shore," replied High, "and now we got a good chance to starve to death. We are strangers, in a strange and unusual land, with no whiskey, no grub, and our tobacco wet. We crossed that river once, because we had to cross it. We never could make it back, and if we did them killers would get us. They acted like they was plumb mad at us."

"They was shore riled some," growled Old Short, "but they can't get us now. What I'm thinking about is something to eat. That little swim gives me an appetite." Short was wiping his guns, and drying them in the sun.

"No use making war motions now," grinned High. "The war is over." He too was cleaning and drying his guns, and counting his cartridges. "I wonder could we kill a cotton-tail rabbit or something, that would help us live a few minutes longer. I've et—Listen!"

They sprang to their feet and caught up

Hell And Texas Were Separated By Only A Streak In The Sand When Two Braved Fire And Bullets.

their guns, as a roaring sound came from up the river. The next moment they were in their saddles and headed for high ground. They just did make it. A great wall of water came roaring down, and within five minutes water was over the top of the willows where they had been sitting.

"In hell, with the door shut, good and tight," rumbled Old Short, as he looked at the seething red flood. "We'll starve plumb to death before we can get back into Texas now."

"If that Ike Westfall and his killers is in the same humor they was in when we migrates from the Lone Star State, I don't want to go back," grinned High.

"We was shore born to be hung, Hiram," said Short, dolefully, "or we would have been got last night. We can't be shot, burned nor drownded. I reck'n the rope has done been twisted that is to hang us, and all we got to do is go to it."

"Maybe so," jeered High, "but this ain't no time to drag it in. I'm so light I wouldn't stretch a rope. Come on. Let's ride across to that little brushy draw. It looks like good hunting ground. Maybe we can find a rabbit or a polecat. I don't aim to starve to death while I'm waiting for some gent to hang me."

They crossed a ridge, and dropped into a long, brushy draw, which headed far out beyond the cattle trail, to the west of them. That draw was deep, and fairly wide, with a thick growth of brush and young trees along the bottom of it. The partners had ridden but a short distance, when High pulled up, worked his nose like a rabbit that scented a dog, and said:

"Short, I smells human grub cooking. Bacon, coffee, and all like that. Do you reck'n they's humans in this godforsook section of turmoil and distress. Don't seem possible, but they's signs, and—"

"Shore," snapped Short, "and there's one of 'em." A gun had cracked, up the draw, and the bullet had whined very close to High's head. He went from his saddle like a rock, but pulled his carbine from the scabbard as he went along. "Did you get orders to dismount, Hiram?"

"Yes," snapped High, "and dang yo' long-legged soul, you'll get 'em if you don't fall off that braunk, and get behind something. Somebody up this draw is on the prod, and— *Wham!* Another bullet came sizzling through the brush, hunting for Short's head. He folded up like a jackknife, as he rolled from his saddle, dragging his own carbine to the ground.

"Got 'em both, fellers," yelled a voice up the draw, and beyond a thick screen of brush.

"I'll bet that gent four bits he's a damn liar," grinned High, as he lay in the weeds and bushes a little way from Short.

"Don't get levitous, Hiram," said Short. "This here is a crucial moment in our unprofitable lives, and maybe the last one. Be humble Hiram. Lie close to the ground. I wish I was as thin as a slice of bacon. I ain't ever saw a hunter yet that didn't tromp through the brush to see what he had shot, or what the dogs had ketched. Them gents—"

Short stopped. Half a dozen voices could be heard, coming down the draw. "Hiram, tend to yo' own side of the draw, and I'll look after mine the best I can. If they get me, try to have me took across to Texas, and buried proper. I—"

Short stopped because he thought High was not listening to him. In fact, he knew the little trailer was not listening to anything, for his gun spat, short and spiteful. Those men had stumbled almost onto them, and High didn't like their way of saying good morning to visitors. Old Short's gun roared the next second, and that draw began to smoke. Four of the approaching men went down, and the other two turned and escaped up the draw. High was up and after them. For some reason the little pleasantry of shooting at him when he was not looking had peeved him.

They broke through the screen of brush together, and there within less than a hundred yards of them, was a camp. Half a dozen men were frantically mounting their horses. The partners turned loose on them. Men who lay up in holes like that, and shot at innocent visitors, were not what might be called good citizens. Two more went down, and the other four scurried away up

the draw. Two of them were carrying a lot of lead that was not in their cartridge belts.

The Danger Trail

High and Short went on to the camp. The men had just prepared a generous breakfast for ten. High and Short fell to on it, without taking the trouble to look their kill over. When they had finished breakfast, the two drifters mounted, climbed out of the draw to high ground where they could watch for boogers, and rode on west, seeking the cattle trail.

"Wonder who them impolite gents was?" said High.

"I don't know," replied Short, "but they fixed us a right good breakfast. They— Look! Yonder's four men, cutting acrost toward the river. I wonder, now— Let's ride to 'em."

The partners started toward the men, and they turned again, and headed west at top speed, straight up the ridge between the draw and the river. High and Short pulled up and let them go. After watching them for a moment, and noting that one was riding pretty low in his saddle, the partners followed on up the brushy draw. The sun was shining brightly, and they had not slept since they could remember. They turned into the thick brush, lariated their horses on some grass in an open glade, and lay down for a nap.

"Hiram, son," said Short, as they cuddled down in a thicket, with their guns near them, "this is a dangerous thing to do."

"Oh, that's all right," said High, sleepily. "If anybody pots me, while I'm asleep, with a full belly, it will be better than hanging, and that's what you said would happen to us."

In a moment the partners were sound asleep, while their horses grazed contentedly on the fine grass.

The four men who had gone on up the ridge, came to a little lip in the ground, and turned toward the river again. At the first clump of willows, the one who was riding low in his saddle slipped off, and lay still on the ground. The other three stopped and looked at him. There was nothing that could be done. He had made his last raid on earth. The remaining three rode on up the river, keeping in the willows. They had almost reached the cattle trail, when they rode square into Burl Otey.

"Hey, you," greeted Otey. "What the hell are you doing here? I told you to hole up in brushy draw, until I comes to you. We crossed that herd this morning, and I sneaked away to let you fellers know that everything is set. I got twelve men, and with your ten, we can take the herd, and nobody ever find it out. Old Man Shep's main killers was drownded this morning, and it will be like takin' candy from a baby. We'll do it tonight, and—"

"Yes, you'll play hell," snapped the tall, handsome fellow who was leader of the three. "A gang of marshals jumps us in that nice draw, where you told us to hide, and only three of us is left. We sneaked up here to tell you, so you can get word to the other boys, before them marshals gets all of us. They ain't on the take, they are on the kill."

"Aw, hell," said Burl Otey. "Why, we had them seven or eight thousand steers right in our hands. That crazy old devil swims 'em this morning, right ahead of that big rise. It's the first big herd up the trail. It will be a month before another herd gets across. We could have them steers in Kansas, and sold, before anybody knew about it."

"You can do it, if you want to. You say they's thirty men with that herd, besides you fellers. But, I'm warning you that they's a whole flock of marshals in here, that will be a damned sight harder to hold than trail hands. We are going to cross the trail, and go on west. So long."

Burl Otey watched them ride away, and mused:

"That's the way it goes. When a feller thinks he's got it, he ain't. I got to get to the boys, some way, and get 'em out of this jam." He spurred back into the trail, and rode on toward the herd. He had gone but a little way, when he heard guns cracking up the river, the way the three men had gone.

Otey drove in his spurs and stormed on to the herd. He was pretty sure that marshals had taken the last three of the gang

who were to help him steal those cattle. That deal was off. The safest place for him was with the trail outfit.

Night came on. Burl and the new hands insisted on taking the first watch. Old Man Shep was taking no chances. Plenty of men had to be with those cattle. He would rather the new men were on guard in the early part of the night, when the cattle were tired.

The other boys had rolled in their blankets and gone to sleep. Old Man Shep was sitting by the camp fire, when he heard spurs jingling, and looking up saw High and Short approaching him. He goggled at them a moment, and then gasped out:

"Where in the sun-dried, sugar-cured hell did you two tramps come from? They told me in Jotown that Ike Westfall and his killers couldn't shoot you, couldn't burn you, and that you was finally drowned in the river this morning."

"Somebody must of lied," drawled Old Short. "We crossed the river this morning, because the air didn't seem right pure on the other side, and—"

Short stopped, as a rumble of hoofs approached the camp from the south. The riders pulled up near the camp, and a gruff voice called:

"Hello, there. What outfit is this?"

"Shep Latty's trail outfit," replied the Old Man.

"Oh, it is? Well, if Mr. Latty is there, I'd like to see him out here."

"All right," said Shep. And then to High and Short, "You boys come along. I might want a witness." What he meant was that he might want a gunner or two.

"I'm a United States marshal," said the gruff voice, as the three approached him. My wagon is back a ways. We took three of the Kinny gang this afternoon. Got one whole, one dead, and one crippled. They said marshals jumped the gang today, and got all but them three, but they lied. My outfit is the only marshals in this part of the country. Have you fellows had a run-in with 'em today."

"We shore haven't," replied Shep. "We crosses the river with these steers this morning, and works 'em on out here. We makes camp at this spring, and by that time it's night."

"I see," said the marshal, thoughtfully, and then lowering his voice, he went on. "Is Burl Otey with your outfit?"

"He shore is. Him and eleven others that I hired in Jotown."

"Know anything about Otey?"

"Shore don't," said Shep. "Him and his partners is good hands, and that's all I want to know about 'em."

"Yes? Well, I'll tell you this one, any way. The member of the Kinney gang that we takes, says his gang was holed up in this same draw, a little way below here, waiting for Burl Otey to give the word. Then they were going to gang on your outfit, and take this herd away from you. How do you like that?"

"Not so well," said Shep, "but they haven't done it, until yet. Nobody ever has took a herd away from me."

"It has been done," snapped the marshal. "Where is Burl Otey?"

"Why, him and his compadres is on herd. They wanted the first watch, and—"

"That'll do," snapped the marshal. "You'll have to get along without Burl. I want him, and probably most of his gang. I'm going to make camp a little way down the draw. Then you and your hands are going with me, and take those fellows as they come in from the herd. Get ready." The marshal turned his horse and rode away.

"Huh," grunted Old Man Shep. "Talks sorty bossy, don't he. He's goin' to leave me short-handed, but I'd rather be that way than to lose my herd."

Midnight. No one came in from the herd to rouse the second watch. Old Man Shep mounted his men, and they started to the herd, the marshals riding with them.

"Mr. Latty," said the marshal, "you didn't know, of course, what kind of men you were hiring, but Burl Otey is one of the worst men in this country. He and his

gang simply tied in with you, meaning to murder your whole outfit, and take your cattle. We've got to rush 'em, when we get to 'em."

They rode slowly on across the prairie, but met no one. When they reached the herd, the cattle were sleeping quietly, and there was not a man in sight.

"Got clean away," growled the marshal.

The party went back to camp and when morning came the marshal found the bodies of the Kinny gang, at their camp down the draw. The chief marshal rode away then talking into his full whiskers and very much puzzled about how it all happened.

Old Shep Latty didn't say anything and neither did he act puzzled; but the matter was not mentioned by him again until the day he paid off High and Short in Kansas.

"I've packed in a mite of bonus for you boys," he growled, as he passed them each a roll of bills, "on account of that trail herd went through more hell than I ever believed existed above or below the sod."

He paused then and looked over the two scare-crow figures hung down by heavy guns before him. "But if you two drifters think that bonus was for eatin' trail dust you're crazier than I take you for. I know you shot up that Kinny gang and saved my herd for me. But what I want to know is did you two shoot Red an' Brazos dead that first day I signed you on?"

High and Short looked nervously at each other and Short's bobbing adam's apple forced up the words:

"Them two jist naturally shot theyselfs."

"What he really means," prompted High, "is that they gun shot each other."

That left Shep Latty scratching his grizzled dome. "All I can hope is," he concluded, "that one or both of you might be around when Ike Westfall decides to shoot heself—I'm sure it would be a damned good job, and there's another bonus for you boys if he does."

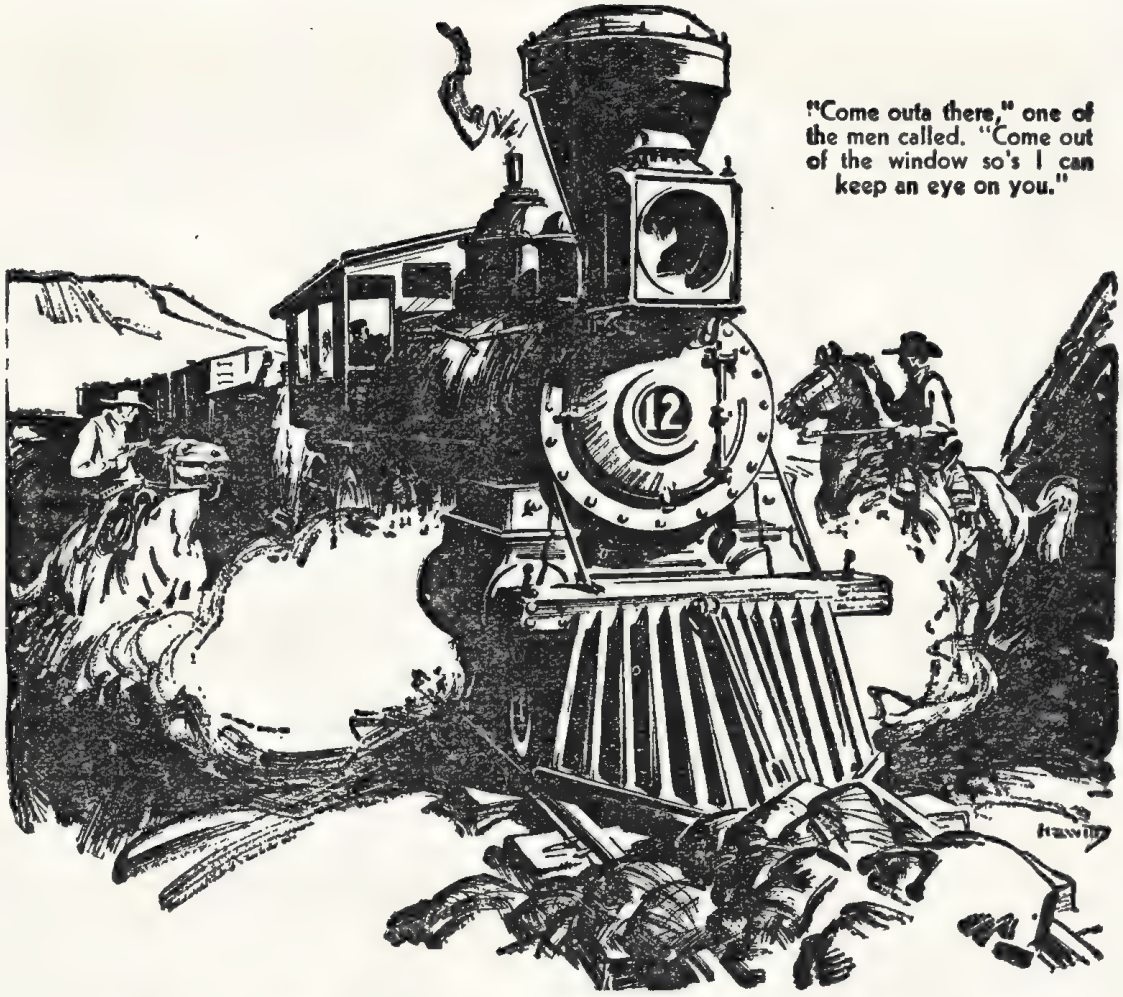
"We might tend to that for fun or pastime," answered High, "but we ain't hired killers as a rule an' I don't think we got more'n an even chance of findin' Mr. Westfall after we cut a bit of this trail dust out of our throats. Howsomever, I'm goin' to look up Mr. Ike and hear from his own lips did he really mean to snap that cap in my face, back in Jotown."

Shep Latty watched the two head for the bat-wing doors of the nearest saloon. Then he shouted:

"If I hear Ike has shot heself where do I send you boys' bonus?"

High paused while Short darted through the swinging doors. "If we happen to be around when he shoots heself," High answered, "we will come an' see you personal."

"Now I wonder," mused Old Shep, "did those two kill Red and Brazos?"



"Come outa there," one of the men called. "Come out of the window so's I can keep an eye on you."

HIGHBALLING TO HELL

ROARING GUNS OF THE BLACK HELL COUNTRY SEARCH OUT THE MAN WHOSE SADDLE WAS A LOCOMOTIVE SEAT

"She's a-comin', Bart!"

"Sho' is. You all ready?"

The first speaker nodded, settling his chunky body firmly in the saddle. His tall companion glanced down the railroad track to where a pile of crossties and heavy stones hid the shining rails.

"Figger they'll stop her when they sees them rocks?" asked the short man.

"If they don't, they'll sho' stop when she hits 'em," returned the other grimly.

"Mebbe they can't stop quick enough," worried the chunky man.

"Yeah, they can. They got them new-fangled air-brake contraptions on them engines and cars. Get sot now—she'll be larrupin' 'round that curve in a minute."

The two sat their horses, tense and

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ready, their eyes fixed on the distant curve. Their ears tingled to the rattling thunder which beat back from the cliffs—the exhaust-thunder of a heavy locomotive laboring up a grade. Bart Turner's cold gaze flicked to the crest of the high embankment on the far side of the right-of-way, and back to the curve. He gathered the reins tight in a sinewy hand, his hard mouth a straight, bloodless gash in his dark face.

Up the grade pounded the big engine, her long train of crossties, steel rails and fish-plates dragging back against her drawbar. With a clang of shovel and clatter of opening and closing firedoor, her sweaty fireman baled in the duffy diamonds. Black smoke boomed up from her stack. Wisps of steam spurted where the packing had worked loose around her straining pistons.

Young Jim Dunn, the engineer, frowned at that escaping steam.

"Hafto go over those stuffing boxes, first chance," he growled to Bates, the fireman. "These infernal hills sho' yank the guts outa a hog in a hurry."

His frosty blue eyes switched back to the twin ribbons of steel uncoiling before his pilot and shimmering in the hot Arizona sunshine.

"Jest wait until we get this new line pushed over into *El Infierno Negro*," said Bates, perking his thumb toward the spot where, slashing the brassy-blue sky ahead, the dark fangs of "The Black Hell" thrust up from their gaping jaws of splintered stone.

Dunn's eyes narrowed as they took in the wild and gloomy wasteland into which the C. & P. railroad was thrusting its steel spears.

"A tough country," he admitted. "But we're going to build through it."

"Lots of bad characters live over there," said Bates.

"Plenty. I heard some of Quantrel's guerrilla hellions drifted down heah after the war 'tween the States was finished. Ain't none of 'em a damn bit pleased over the railroad comin' to *El Infierno Negro*. Railroads in a country mean law and order, sooner or later, and that's what those birds don't want."

"We'll have trouble with 'em, I betcha," predicted Bates pessimistically. "We'll—Look out, Jim! Hold her!"

Dunn slammed the throttle shut, and as Bates' voice rose in a wild yell, he wiped the clock.

The long train rocked and staggered as the full application of the air brakes ground the iron shoes against the wheels. The engine bucked like an outlaw bronc with a sandburr under his saddle. Couplings clanged. Flanges squealed. Dunn saw the obstruction on the track as the curve straightened out, and his blue eyes blazed with anger. He was too busy trying to save his train to notice the two horsemen who rode from behind a clump of stone and raced in pursuit of the careening engine.

With a final screech of brakes the locomotive stopped, her nose just poking against the heap of stone and ties. Jim Dunn whirled sideways on his seat and looked straight into the black muzzle of a heavy Colt. Bates on the other side of the cab was similarly confronted.

"Come outa that," the tall man behind the gun told Dunn. "Nev' mind goin' 'round to the gangway. Crawl through the window, wheah I can keep a eye on you."

For an instant the engineer hesitated, then he obeyed, dropping lithely to the ground, his stocky, wide-shouldered body seeming to move on springs.

"Vance," called the tall man, "send that feller over heah with thisun. Then you ride 'round them rocks and hold my bronc while I do a little talkin'."

The tall man dismounted, tossed the reins to his companion and faced Jim Dunn. The tall man's black eyes glared into the blue. The black shifted first, which seemed to anger their owner. His thin lips twisted in a snarl. The hand holding the gun jerked nervously.

"Feller, I got somethin' to tell you," he said harshly.

Jim Dunn's reply clipped at him like twin bullets.

"Tell it!"

The other's jaw dropped slightly. He gulped, evidently trying to control the murderous rage which strove to master him.

"Don't you try no funny back-talkin' to me, or you won't last long enough to hear it," he growled.

"Listen," he barked as Dunn started to speak again. "This damn railroad ain't goin' no farther. We don't want no railroad in *El Infierno Negro,* and we ain't gonna have none. You un'erstan'?"

"Why the hell are you tellin' me about it?" blared the engineer. "I'm not running this railroad, and I'm not building it. I'm just a hogger on a material train. If I *was* running it, I'd see you and your whole nest of sidewinders a mile deep in hell before I'd let you stop me. That plain enough?"

The tall man's face turned a dirty gray under his tan. His eyes blazed with maniacal fury. The big gun jutted forward.

Crack!

Jim Dunn lurched back over a loose stone and sprawled on the ground.

The tall man's voice rose in a yell of rage. He glared wildly about, wringing the fingers of his right hand, from which blood streamed. His chunky companion glanced over his shoulder, let the reins fall and jerked his hands high above his head. Bates cowered against the steel tender, the black side of which showed a whitish blotch where the bullet that had knocked Bart Turner's gun spinning had smashed into it.

"Don't try to pick it up, Bart!"

Jim Dunn heard the ringing tones as he scrambled to his feet. He glanced upward.

On the crest of the embankment a man lounged carelessly in a high Mexican saddle. He held a rifle which pointed loosely in the general direction of the group on the ground. Even at that distance, Dunn could see the humorous quirk at the corners of the wide mouth and the laugh in the sunny eyes.

The rifle suddenly spouted flame. Bart's gun leaped from beneath his clutching fingers and went bounding under the wheels of the locomotive. The man on horseback laughed gaily.

"Won't you ever learn nothin'?" he called.

Jim Dunn gave vent to a soundless whistle of amazement. "Why he never even aimed or raised the gun to his shoulder!" he exclaimed.

Bart was cursing steadily and incoherently. "Travis, you're gonna horn into my affairs once too often," he gulped thickly at last.

The man on horseback seemed to change, become another person altogether. The laughter went out of his eyes. Into them crept a cold glitter, like dagger points in the sun. His voice became harshly metallic.

"Bart, fork yore bronc. Then you and Vance trail outa heah, pronto. If you ain't back of them rocks by the time I count fifty, I'll drill you both dead center. Get goin'!"

The chunky man did not hestitate. Almost before the other had ceased speaking his horse was clattering over the loose stones. As Bates, the fireman, later expressed it, "When he rounded the pile of crossties, he was six feet ahead of his shadow!" Bart stood rigid for an instant. Then he mounted clumsily because of his wounded hand and rode after Vance. Travis sat silently watching until they had vanished among the rocks.

"Comin' to see you," he called to the engine crew.

Straight down the almost perpendicular embankment he rode, his tall black horse skittering on hoofs that scored long gashes in the reddish clay.

"That jigger can ride as good as he can shoot," commented Dunn.

The stranger arrived in a cloud of dust and rolling stones. He gazed at the railroad men, a whimsical expression in his greenish eyes.

He was not a tall man, but his well-knit figure, though slimmer and more graceful, was almost as wide-shouldered as that of the stocky engineer. Dunn noticed that his bronzed hands were wonderfully deft and supple, with long slender fingers.

"He's just all steel wires and whipcord," was the hogger's judgment. "Thanks," he said simply, without needless explanation.

The stranger nodded, a gleam of appreciation in his eyes. "Ain't no thanks comin'," he chuckled. "I got too much fun outa tanglin' Bart Turner's rope for him.

What kind of a whizzer was he runnin' on you, anyhow?"

Dunn told him. The other nodded thoughtfully. "Bart's a sorta kingpin of one of the *El Infierno Negro* outfits. Guess he figgers a railroad'll kinda cramp his style. Most of Bart's doin's ain't nothin' to write home to mother about. Heah comes a coupla fellers up the track."

Dunn glanced over his shoulder. "The conductor and head shack comin' over to see what's the matter," he said. "Head man was back in the caboose grabbin' off a bite to eat," he explained.

A rapid-fire exchange of questions and answers followed. Conductor and brakeman turned admiring glances to the stranger.

"Tom Doty, the brains, and Bill Dudley, a mighty worthless shack," Dunn introduced them to Travis.

"Right glad to know you boys," said Travis. "May see you again some time. Gotta be trailin' my rope now."

He was gone, riding swiftly along the right-of-way until he reached a low spot in the embankment. The black horse went up it like a goat. Travis waved a hand and vanished.

"Hope we ain't seen the last of that feller," said the conductor.

Jim Dunn nodded, a speculative light in his frosty eyes. "And I bet we ain't seen the last of them other two, either," he muttered, half to himself.

The track was cleared, after a lot of hard work and harder swearing, and Jim Dunn pulled his belated material train into Crater field headquarters for the C. & P. road builders. An irate trainmaster sputtered wrathfully over the tale of the outrage and expressed his opinion of things in general in language that smelled of brimstone.

"You go down to the sheriff's office, Jim," he concluded, "and tell Watson what you know. Perhaps he can suggest something. I'll get in touch with the super's office at Gila and see if they'll send over a few more bulls."

Dunn did not think the railroad detectives would be much good against the *El Infierno Negro* gangs, but he merely nodded and departed for the sheriff's office.

It was pay day for several of the ranches that drove their trail-herds into Crater and the cattle-railroad-mining town was booming. Cowboys in chaps and wide hats jostled bearded miners whose rough clothes were stained with clay. Indians with plenty of bad whiskey and very little of civilization in them stalked past in sullen silence. Saloons and dance halls bellowed. Gambling hells clicked and shuffled. Life was red and raw here on this wild frontier, and always noisy.

Jim Dunn, who had himself been, not many years before, a "rider of the purple sage," nodded to cowboy acquaintances, exchanging a brief word with one from time to time. He had a drink in a saloon, chaffed for a few minutes with a couple of dancehall girls and then turned into a quieter side street. A little later he entered the pine-board shack which served as the sheriff's office.

Tom Watson, the sheriff, was seated at the table that served him for a desk. A big man with shrewd eyes and a kindly mouth, he listened without comment until Dunn had finished his story.

"Bart Turner's a uncommon salty hombre," he said at last, as the engineer sat rolling a cigarette. "I've known, to my own puhs'nal satisfaction, quite a while that he's boss of a *El Infierno Negro* settlement of horned toads, but I ain't never been able to pin nothin' on him for certain. This looks like we might be gonna hang a brand on him. You sure it was Turner?"

"All I know is that feller he called Travis called him Turner," Dunn admitted.

The sheriff mused a minute. Suddenly he shifted his feet from the table to the floor and jerked open a drawer.

"Jest happened to think—I got a picture of Bart heah somewheah. He was 'spected of a little mail robbin' business a while back and they got out a circular on him. Couldn't make the charge stick, but I jest kept Bart's picture to remember him by after I hang him."

Dunn leaned forward and watched Watson shuffle the circulars, his gaze flickering

over a succession of hard faces with printed notices beneath them.

"It's heah in this pile, I know damn well," the sheriff grunted. "Nope, that's not it."

Jim Dunn suddenly stiffened in his chair. Watson had flipped out a picture, held it for an instant and shoved it beneath the heap without comment. But not before the engineer had caught a glimpse of a lean face from which a pair of sunny eyes flashed quizzically. He had no chance to read the notice printed beneath, but brief though the glimpse had been, recognition had been complete. The face was the face of Travis!

The engineer's face was expressionless when Watson looked up, a circular in his hand, but he hardly heard the sheriff's words.

"Heah it is; good picture of him. Was this the jigger?"

Jim Dunn started. His lips closed in a straight line. Then they opened to draw a deep sigh of relief. Watson was holding a crumpled sheet from which glared a sullen bearded face.

"That's Turner, all right" the engineer declared without hesitation. "He wasn't wearin' whiskers when I saw him, but it's him."

Watson grunted his satisfaction. "Fust direct line I've ever been able to get on that jigger," he declared. " 'Cohse we ain't got nothin' wuth while against him right now—he didn't do much more'n make some threats—but he's showed his hand. We'll know who to look for when somethin' else busts."

The two men sat silent for some minutes; then Watson voiced a question.

"What'd that feller Travis look like?"

Dunn strove to throw a note of casualness into his answer. "Oh, a black-haired feller 'bout my size, maybe not quite so big."

Watson nodded absently, his gaze still fixed on Bart Turner's leering features. "A puncher from one of the ranches, I guess. The way he rode and shot sounds like it. Lots of young hellions 'round heah who don't like nothin' better'n a chance to horn inter a row. Hold on, Jim, have a drink 'fore you go."

Jim Dunn left the office in a perplexed frame of mind. "Maybe I'd oughta told the sheriff all 'bout Travis," he mused, "seein' as he's one of them 'reward for capture' jiggers. But I'll be damned if I've got the guts to make trouble for a feller what saved my life. I just ain't built that way."

A rumbling growl sounded deep in his throat and his bushy eyebrows drew down fiercely over his frosty blue eyes. A third of a century later that growl and that scowl were to be known from end to end of the mighty C. & P. railroad, known and recognized by the tens of thousands of men who swore by —although sometimes they swore at—General Manager James G. "Jaggers" Dunn.

Hallihan, the veteran division superintendent at Gila, outlined the situation in one word—"Trouble!"

He was right. Trouble came thick and fast for the C. & P. road builders. Camp cars were burned. Workers were terrorized by bullets whistling past their heads. Material was stolen or destroyed. The bulls were furious but helpless. The C. & P., in the face of difficulties, grimly kept on building railroad. Farther and farther into the gloomy waste of *El Infierno Negro* sprawled the twin steel fingers. Jim Dunn and other intrepid enginemen took to carrying guns.

"Feel like I was back on a cuttin' hoss, twirlin' a rope," Jim chuckled to Bates, his fireman.

"Be lucky if you ain't twirlin' the strings of a harp 'fore long, and me, too," ungrammatically growled the pessimistic tallowpot.

The activities of the Black Hell gangs took a sinister turn. A material train rounded a curve and ploughed into a spot where the rails had been removed. Bullets peppered the wrecked engine, whose crew took shelter among the rocks.

"One feller rode up close and took a look at us," the engineer told Jim Dunn. "He rode away quick when he heard your engine whistlin' back behind us."

"What'd he look like?" asked Dunn.

"Kind of a wide-shouldered feller, 'bout as tall as you. He rode a big black hoss."

"Wide-shouldered feller on a black hoss," Jim muttered to himself later, as he watched sweating track laborers trying to get the derailed locomotive back on the iron. "Sho' sounds like that jigger, Travis. I wonder now, could Travis be boss of a gang, same as Bart Turner? That might account for him and Bart bein' on the outs. Bart accused him of buttin' into his business, I rec'lect. Now if this ain't a hell of a mess!"

Three nights later Jim gleaned information that added to his worries. He stepped from a saloon and in the shadows outside the door came face to face with a chunky man with shifty eyes.

The struggle was fierce, but short. Vance's right hand streaked to his gun. Fingers like nickel-steel rods clamped his hand to his side, wrenched the Colt from its holster and jammed the muzzle against his ribs.

"All right," said Dunn, "walk across the street and sit down 'side that hitchrack. You and me is gonna have a little powwow."

Vance did as he was told. Jim peered at him through the gray darkness. He came straight to the matter in question.

"Vance, who is that feller, Travis?"

"How the hell am I s'posed to know?"

"I didn't ask you how you was s'posed to know anything, I said, who is he?"

Vance growled deep in his throat. "Some smart hombre who thinks he's bad. He's damn fast with a gun, but he's gonna get his if he keeps on messin' in Bart Turner's business."

"He ain't one of Turner's outfit, then?"

"Hell, no! He don't b'long to any outfit what I know 'bout. He's a sorta lone wolf out in the Hell. I heered some kind a yarn 'bout him bein' wanted for a killin' back East. Heered, too, that he's the jigger what robbed the mail train coupla months ago."

Jim Dunn, his brows knit over this disquieting information, did not see the crafty gleam in Vance's eyes. The short man's voice cracked in a querulous whine:

"What you gonna do with me? Turn me over to the sheriff?"

Jim Dunn grunted. "No, I ain't. Chances are you've done things you'd oughta be hung for, but I didn't see you do 'em. I'm gonna give you yore gun back and turn you loose.

"But listen, Vance," his words were like the grind of steel on ice, "if I ever see you pullin' any more funny stuff 'round the railroad, I'm gonna dust yore coat on both sides for you!"

The call boy who awakened Jim for his run the following afternoon was gabbling with news.

"Happened right over t'other side of town, wheah they been surveyin' for the new yard," he gurgled, the words tumbling out so fast Jim could hardly follow them. "Three of 'em rode up to Trainmaster Hardy, talked to him a coupla minutes and shot him. Trackmen workin' a little ways off saw it all but couldn't do nothin' —just stood and watched them fellers ride away again."

"Trainmaster dead?" demanded Dunn. "No? What does he have to say 'bout it?"

"Ain't never got his senses back yet," explained the caller. "Jest lays theah white and quiet and breathin' hard. Doc says he'll live, though. Don't nobody know what them fellers said to him."

Jim Dunn had a very good idea what "them fellers said," and his mouth set in a hard line.

"What did they look like?" he asked the caller.

"One of 'em was tall, one short and chunky, and the other one wasn't so short and had big wide shoulders—kinda yore size, I guess, Jim."

"Not so short, with wide shoulders," the engineer muttered to himself. "Hell! It just couldn't be? But—"

"All right, Tommy," he told the caller, "I'll be on the job quick as I grab a bite to eat."

"Sheriff lit right out after them fellers," the caller said, "but they had a purty big start."

Dunn nodded absently and strode off toward a restaurant.

Over the kinky and poorly ballasted new track that staggered through the gloomy wildness of *El Infierno Negro,* boomed and clattered the big straight-stacker that pulled the material train. Jim Dunn was so busy jockeying his engine over that outlandish stretch of railroad that he had little time to devote to the disturbing information he had obtained from the caller. Bates was nervous and more pessimistic than usual. The head brakeman crouched on his little perch in front of the tallow-pot's seatbox and fearfully scanned the ominous hills and gorges through which they bored. He swore querulously as the engine thundered into the mouth of a long, tortuous canyon.

"The Gate," the canyon was called, for it provided the only practical entrance to the true *El Infierno Negro.* Hours earlier, Sheriff Watson and his posse had ridden through this gorge in futile pursuit of the men who had shot Trainmaster Hardy.

"Right in heah is wheah we are all gonna get drygulched some time," said the head shack, shouting to make himself heard over the crash of the exhaust and the growl of the laboring drivers.

"Jest what I'm 'spectin' any day," grunted Bates. "We'll all be so fulla bullet holes we'll starve to death from leakin' our vittles out. By gosh! theah's some hellion ridin' along in front of us right now!"

The brakeman leaned far out the window, scanning the distant rider with apprehensive eyes. "Bet theah's a whole slew of 'em back of them rocks somewheah. That feller sho' is making' his bronc sift sand."

"Keeps lookin' back this way like he was watchin' us," observed Bates. Then:

"Jim, that feller is givin' us some kinda signals. Mebbe you'd better shut her off."

"He ain't givin' no washout," growled Dunn, who had been watching the rider with a puzzled expression. "Now what the hell—"

Suddenly he slammed the throttle shut, dropped the reverse lever down into the front corner. At the same instant he had recognized both the rider and his intentions.

The crackling thunder of the exhaust abruptly stilled, the siderods clanked and clanged, the big engine lunged from the shove of her heavy train. Bates twirled his blower wide open as black smoke surged back into the cab.

"What's the matter, Jim?" demanded the fireman. "What you doin'?"

"Feller wants to get aboard," answered Dunn briefly. "Come here and grab this automatic air. Give her everything if I yell."

Bates obeyed. Jim slipped from his seatbox and wedged himself in the gangway, leaning far out, bracing himself by knees jammed against the vertical grabirons.

A hundred yards ahead, the rider sat his racing horse. Foam from the animal's gasping jaws flecked back over its glossy black hide. Dunn could almost hear its nervous snorts as the great engine thundered close.

The broad-shouldered rider shifted in the saddle. He kicked his right foot free from the stirrup, let the reins drop and swung the foot across the horse's neck, clinging desperately to the pommel with both hands. He freed his left foot from the stirrup and thrust his right foot in its place. For an instant he stood erect on the single foot, his whole body quivering with the strain. Then, as the engine roared past him, he twisted around, thrust out both hands and leaped for the narrow gangway.

Jim Dunn clutched those groping hands in a grip of iron. He heaved back against the terrific downward jerk of the other's body, felt his knees pulled loose from their hold, his feet slipping on the smooth steel. He put forth all his strength in a last magnificent effort.

Back onto the floorboards sprawled the pair, Dunn's fingers locked about the other's wrist. They struggled, gasping, to their feet and grinned into each other's eyes.

"Howdy, Travis," said the engineer. "In a hurry 'bout somethin'?"

Travis wasted no time. "Get goin'," he barked. "Bart Turner and Vance and another sidewinder is ahead of us. They'd a-give me the slip if you hadn't happened along. They fooled the sheriff complete—hid 'longside the mouth of this canyon and let him ride on ahead of them. I'd tried to take a short cut and head them off 'fore they reached the canyon. Got pocketed in the hills and hadda ride miles outa my way. Saw everythin' what went on at the canyon mouth, but couldn't let the sheriff know."

The crash of the exhaust drowned his voice. Bates' shovel clanged and rattled. Jim Dunn jockeyed the reverse bar back up toward the center of the quadrant. The big engine leaped forward. A minute passed, two. The brakeman let out an apprehensive howl.

"Jim, you're gonna have us all over the ground! This track won't stand no such speed!"

Travis held his breath as the howling locomotive careened wildly around sharp curves, leaped and lurched across low places in the new track. The cursing fireman bounced about like a pea in a cyclone, as much coal going out the gangway or the window as reached the firebox.

Jim Dunn's voice clipped through the uproar: "Theah they are!"

Travis peered over the engineer's shoulder. "Yeah it's them. Killin' their hosses, too. Done figgered we're after 'em."

The three riders in the distance seemed to fairly leap back toward the flying train. Their straining horses might as well have been standing still. Travis lurched to the gangway, loosening his gun in its holster.

"One of 'em's down!" yelled the brakeman.

Jim Dunn slammed the throttle shut. Air screeched through the automatic brake valve port. The engine reeled.

The riders ahead had pulled up beside their comrade, whose stricken horse lay kicking feebly. They swung to the ground, rifles in hand, facing the iron monster that thundered toward them. Travis swung down the steps, dropped to the ground. Dunn heard the crackle of shots as his slowing engine swept past the milling horses.

As the locomotive lurched around a curve, Jim left her. He sprawled off balance for an instant, clutching at knife-edged fangs of stone. Then he raced toward the booming guns.

Two men—Vance and a broad-shouldered, broken-nosed individual—were on the ground when Dunn leaped from behind the boulders. Travis was stuffing cartridges into his empty gun. Bart Turner stood with feet wide-spread, the muzzle of his rifle lined with Travis' broad breast.

"Gotcha, you mangy lobo!" he yelled, his lean finger curving on the trigger.

Jim Dunn hurled his stocky body forward, his feet seeming to scarcely touch the ground. He went through the air in a streaking dive.

The rifle roared as it clattered to the stones, Dunn and Bart Turner on top of it. Travis ran toward them, gun ready, just in time to see the engineer's fist crash against the outlaw's jaw. Turner stiffened out, quivered an instant and lay still. Jim Dunn staggered to his feet, in his ears the click of swift hoofbeats. Travis spoke.

"Heah comes the sheriff—musta doubled back when they heard the shootin'."

Sheriff Watson swung to the ground, gun in hand. His eyes lighted with recognition as they rested on Travis.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he whooped at Dunn, "so this is the jasper you called Travis! His name ain't Travis! It's Trevison. I got his picture from the Department of Justice last month!"

He strode forward, dropped a heavy hand on the green-eyed man's shoulder.

"Why didn't you come to my office?" he demanded. "Gov'ment sent me yore picture, sayin' you was the new Deputy United States Marshal and asked me to give you all the help I could in solvin' that mail robbery."

"Done solved it," chuckled Trevison. "These heah horned toads on the ground is it. I hung 'round out in *El Infierno Negro* till I got the lowdown on 'em; but if it hadn't been for Jim Dunn heah—"

He turned to the engineer and held out his hand.

"Thanks," he said simply.

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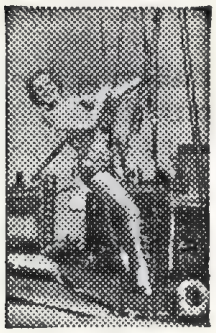

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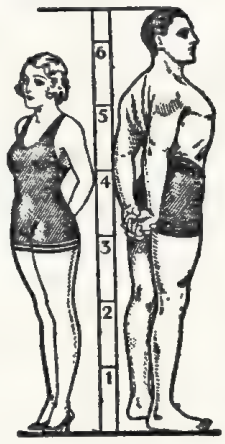

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Black John Smith Opines Common Sense Has Got the Law Beat All to Hell

Ethics On Halfaday

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Black John Takes a Hand," "The Patriots," and Many Other Stories of Halfaday Creek

IN THE barroom of Cushing's Fort on Halfaday Creek, where a little community of outlawed men had sprung up close against the Alaska-Yukon border, Black John Smith thumped the leather dice box on the bar and rattled out the cubes.

"Three fives," he announced. "I'll leave 'em in one. The probabilities is that they're good."

Old Cush, the proprietor, picked up the scattered dice, returned them to the box, and cast them. "Probabilities don't buy no drinks," he commented. "Take a look at them three sixes." Laying the box aside, he set out a bottle and two glasses.

"Hey—that's only the first horse," protested Black John.

"There wasn't nothin' said about horses—one flop is as good as a hundred," replied the unperturbed Cush, pouring his liquor.

"You ort to be rich," grumbled

Black John, "what with the luck you've got with the dice—an' sellin' rotten pants ——"

"What d'you mean—rotten pants? I ain't got a pant in the store that ain't as good as you kin git in Dawson!"

"Yeah? Well, git around behind me an' take a squint at these ones that I got off'n you day before yesterday. I leant over this mornin' to pick up my shoe an' they split from the crutch clean up to the belt."

"It's like I told you when you got 'em —a man of your size ain't got no business buyin' little pants."

"Little—hell! A man likes fer his pants to touch him here an' there, so he knows he's still got 'em on. Them ones you was tryin' to sell me was so damn big that if I'd turned around quick they'd have been left standin' the way they was, an' folks wouldn't have know'd whether I was comin' er goin'."

"They'll know now," grinned Cush. "An' if I was you, I'd stay facin' 'em. Here comes someone, now. Damn if it ain't Corporal Downey!"

Black John glanced toward the doorway through which the young officer of the Mounted was entering the room. "Jest the man I wanted to see!" he exclaimed. "What's the law on sellin' weak an' inferior goods?"

"Meanin' Cush's liquor?" grinned Downey.

"No, his damn liquor would eat the linin' out of a blast furnace. But his pants won't hardly hold together whilst a man's gittin' into 'em. Look at these! I got 'em day before yesterday, an' already they look like these here chaps that cowboys wear!"

OLD CUSH drawled, "Seems like the law has somethin' to say about a man runnin' around without no seat in his pants—don't it, Downey?"

"Yer each fined a round of drinks," laughed the officer. "Has a short, heavy-set, one-eyed man showed up here within the last couple of days?"

"I couldn't say," replied Cush, setting out the glasses, and shoving the bottle toward Downey.

"Oh, come now, Cush," replied the officer, frowning slightly. "Surely, you'd have noticed a one-eyed man!"

"Which eye was gone?" asked the somber faced proprietor.

"Why—his left one. What difference would that make?"

"The trail," explained Cush solemnly, "follers clost to the river, an' if anyone went up it, I wouldn't see nothin' but the right side of his face."

"Did this here fella commit some transgression? Er did you jest want to see him about his eye?" asked Black John.

"He murdered a fireman on a steamboat—smashed his head in with a cordwood stick."

"Mebbe he had it comin'," suggested the other.

Downey shook his head. "No, this fireman had befriended the damn cuss—give him passage up from Tanana, let him sleep beside the boilers, an' fed him. The fireman got drunk in Dawson an' when he come rollin' down to the boat jest on the break of daylight in the mornin', a wood-passer happened to see this bird bash him over the head. When he stooped to go through the fireman's pockets, the wood-passer yelled an' the fella took out up past the saw-mill an' disappeared. I've been on his trail fer two weeks."

"H-u-u-m," Black John combed thoughtfully at his beard with his fingers. "An' you say that after what this here fireman done fer this bird, he knocked him in the head an' ondertook to rob him? There couldn't be no mistake about it, could there?"

"None whatever. The wood-passer is a good reliable man, an' when he let out that yell, he woke up two other wood-passers, and all three identified the man as he ran up the bank. This is one case where we've got plenty of evidence."

"A man," mused Black John, "who'd double-cross anyone that had befriended him, wouldn't be no kind of a man to have on a crick. Would it be possible, Downey, that this here cuss would be wearin' a black an' white checked shirt, which it had been patched acrost the back with a piece of blue?"

"That's the man!"

"An' would he be packin' a bran' new pack sack, made out of white canvas with black straps criss-crossed acrost the back of it like chechakos has?"

"Jest exactly! He slipped up to a camp one night on the river an' stole that pack sack off'n some chechakos! Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Why—this murderer, of course!"

"Oh—him. Why, damn if I know, Downey. You'd ort to know by this time that us, up here on Halfaday, bein' outlaws mostly, we wouldn't give out no information to the police—even if we know'd anything, which we don't. I was jest thinking how, if I was one-eyed, an' had murdered a fireman, an' had an outfit like that, an' I was to come to a place like this, I'd keep on a-goin' about eight mile further up the crick till I come to a pole shack built clost in agin' the rimrocks, an' then I'd hole up."

CORPORAL DOWNEY bought a round of drinks, and departed. Late that afternoon he again stopped in at Cushing's Fort, accompanied by a manacled prisoner. The prisoner was a one-eyed man. He wore a black and white checked shirt patched with blue, and carried a brand new white canvas pack sack with straps crossed in the back. His single eye flashed venomously as it flitted from Cush to Black John.

"You're a hell of a bunch of outlaws!" he sneered. "Lettin' a damn cop go the hull len'th of yer crick, an' grab a man off! The way the talk was down on the river—if a man onct got to Halfaday he was safe. That there wouldn't no damn cop dare to go up there!"

"It was ondoubtless jest a rumor you heard," replied Black John. "On Halfaday we don't never interfere with no policeman in the discharge of his dooty—nor neither we don't help him none. We're moral, up here. We don't aim to run foul of the law."

Another man paused in the doorway, hesitated a moment at sight of the uniform, and entered. Black John grinned.

"That's right, Red, come in. This here's Corporal Downey." He turned to the officer. "That's Red John Smith. He's one of us Alasky boys—nothin' on him in the Yukon. It's gittin' late, Downey. Why don't you lay over, an' git an early start in the mornin'? We kin drop yer prisoner in the hole, an' roll a pork bar'l on the lid."

Corporal Downey hesitated, and, stepping closer, said in an undertone, "I'd like

to, John, but—well, I appreciate what you do for me now an' then. I know you do it because I've always played square with you. If I want a man, I come up here to get that man. I've never snooped on you—have never hung around when it wasn't necessary. It would make my work harder, if some of you men got the idea that——"

"No, no, nothin' like that, Downey," interrupted Black John. "The boys all know that you ain't no snooper. It won't discommode 'em none. I'll send Red John down the crick, an' one of the others up it, an' they'll pass the word that you're stoppin' over with me tonight. None of the Yukon wanteds will show up till you've pulled out. Then, in the mornin' we kin onroll the pork bar'l an' fetch up yer prisoner, an' you kin git goin'."

WITH the prisoner safely ensconced in "the hole," a small subterranean chamber furnished with a bunk and blankets, that had been scooped out from under the floor of the storeroom, and Red John off on his mission, Corporal Downey and Black John found themselves once more ranged across the bar from Old Cush.

"Takin' 'em by an' large," observed Black John, as he poured out a liberal drink, "one-eyed men seems to have criminal tendencies. There's One-Eyed John, which we hung fer skullduggery, an' this here bird, which he'll ondoubtless git hung down to Dawson, if the law works with the free an' ontrammeled jestice that obtains on Halfaday, an' there's the One-Eyed Portagee, which he's still amongst us—but travellin', as you might say, on thin ice."

Downey grinned. "I don't think the one-eyed part has anything to do with it. There's plenty of criminals that's still got both their eyes."

"Well, that's somethin' fer a man to think about, too," admitted Black John. "I didn't mean that all criminals was one-eyed. Mebbe it's jest that more of 'em's caught in proportion—because the cops gits the chanct to slip up on the blind side."

'I saw a couple of birds when I was goin' up the crick this mornin' that I'd sure like to get the evidence on," said Downey. "They're pardners livin' in a tent on a wide bend about three miles up."

"Oh—you mean Abraham Davis an' Jefferson Lincoln! They come in about six weeks ago with a lie on their lips—claimin' they wasn't wanted fer nothin'. But we took notice that they helped themselves to a couple of names out of the can. This here Jeff Lincoln, he's damn clost-mouthed, an' silent—a man, I'd say off hand, not to be trusted."

"Huh," observed Cush, "I'd rather trust a silent man than one that run off at the head like that damn Abe Davis does. A man that talks as much as he does is bound to lie—there ain't enough truth to be told to take care of all the gassin' he does. Part of it's bound to be lies!"

"Well, lyin' *per se,* as a lawyer would say, ain't nothin' agin a man. I've heard you lie."

"Not frivolous. If I lie, there's a reason. I never run hog-wild with my lyin' like he does."

"I assume," said Black John, turning to Downey, "that these parties is suspected of some malfeasance. Am I right?"

"Yeah—plenty right. They murdered an old Dutchman up a feeder that runs into Eldorado. They tortured him before they killed him. We found where they'd busted his cache."

"Well, Dutchmen, as such, ain't supposed to be murdered, I guess."

"This one was a damn nice old fellow. Everyone liked him. The sourdoughs are sure boilin' over about it. These two hombres, Williams and Connor, their names are, would have been lynched if they hadn't skipped out."

"Lynchin's bad business," commented Cush gravely. "It breeds a contempt fer the law."

"That's right," agreed Black John. "Lynchin' does good, now an' then by way of example to young folks, but it hadn't ort to be condoned, on account there ain't no ethics to it. A hangin' by miners' meetin', or a good legal hangin', has got 'em beat all to hell. It would be okay with us, Downey, if you was to fetch them two back with you, along with the one-eyed man. We don't deem 'em no hell of a addition to Halfaday."

"Yeah," agreed Cush. "They could be got along without. Davis, he talks too damn much."

"An' Lincoln's too damn still."

"I'd sure like to take 'em in," said Downey. "But I've got no evidence. I'm morally certain that they murdered old Schultz, but I can't prove it. They were damn shrewd about the job—no bullets nor empty shells, no fingerprints, no footprints, nothin'. Moosehide Charlie saw 'em coming out of that crick the day be-

fore the old man was found with his feet all burnt, an' a piece of wire twisted tight around his neck. But Cuter Malone an' his bunch alibied 'em. Some day that damn Malone's goin' to overstep the mark —an' believe me, when he does, he'll get his!"

"Fetch him up to Halfaday with you sometime," grinned Black John, "an' then fergit him."

"I'd like to, at that," smiled the officer. "He's a menace to the community. Most anything that would happen to Cuter Malone would be all right with me. But I'd sure like to get the evidence on these two birds. They done one thing that I don't quite savvy. They stopped into the public administrator's an' each left a sealed envelope with him which they claimed was their wills. He wrote their names acrost 'em an' put 'em in his safe."

"Well, hell," suggested Black John, "why don't you open 'em an' see? They might have wrote somethin' that would help you out."

"Can't do it. It wouldn't be legal. I have no right to open the envelopes. An officer has got to abide by the law."

THAT'S so," grinned Black John. "The law shore does everything it kin to handicap the police, don't it? It seems like the ones that makes the laws sets up nights thinkin' up new things to make it onlawful to do, an' then sets up the next night figgerin' out other laws that blocks the enforcin' of the ones they made the night before. If they can't figger a way to hinder the police—they figger how to prevent a conviction, after they git arrested."

"Well, a citizen's rights has got to be protected, too."

"Yeah, but that's where I claim common sense has got the law beat all to hell. In miners' meetin', if a man's guilty, we hang him, an' there ain't no way fer him to git out of it—much as he'd like to. But in a legal trial, if the judge don't turn a man loose because some clerk misspelt his name in the indictment, the chances is the jury will. What I claim—damn a system where one man kin lie onto a jury an' then block a trial by simply votin' the way the others don't! A man's either guilty, er he ain't—no matter how his name's spelt!"

"There's a lot of truth in that," admitted the officer. "I know Williams an' Connor murdered Schultz—but I can't prove it."

"About them wills?" asked Black John. "Was these birds supposed to have much of an estate? About what would you figger they was worth—includin' what they got off'n the Dutchman?"

"Well, the sourdoughs claim they didn't have a great deal of their own—they were too lazy to work much at their claims. They say old man Schultz prob'ly had quite a stake. He's been at it fer years. Never banked his dust in Dawson like most of the boys do. Kept it all cached. They figure he must have had anywhere from twenty to fifty thousand cached away."

Other men began to drift into the saloon, and the conversation became general. Someone suggested a poker game, and Corporal Downey cashed in shortly after midnight, some thirty dollars to the good.

EARLY the following morning he left Cush's with his prisoner.

"So long!" cried Black John. "An' good luck to you! If them two miscreants pulls anything on Halfaday, like they done on Eldorado, they'll git jestice met out to 'em in no oncertain terms. So I wouldn't worry none, if I was you. The chances is hombres like them couldn't stay good very long."

When the officer had gone, Old Cush regarded Black John reproachfully. "By Gosh, we never give him a drink before he pulled out! I was busy fillin' them bottles —but you'd ort to thought of it."

"That's all right. Downey don't never drink in the mornin'. Lots of folks don't. But that wouldn't hinder me none, if you was to set 'em up."

"Have you et?"

"Yeah, me an' Downey had pancakes an' coffee."

"Wait till I eat then, an' I'll buy one. It ain't good fer a man he should drink before breakfast." He disappeared into the storeroom to return a moment later with a thick slice of ham on a plate. Spreading it liberally with mustard, he lifted a water tumbler from the back bar and poured it three-quarters full of whiskey. Then, with his pocket knife and a fork he took from a drawer, he fell to.

"Cripes!" exclaimed Black John, as he watched the other swallow a huge mouthful of ham and wash it down with a draught of raw liquor. "Don't you fry yer ham?"

"No—fryin' don't help it none. It makes it tough. A man's kind of got to look out fer his health. Raw ham an' whiskey is a good breakfast fer any man. Any doctor'll tell you that if a man wants to stay well he's got to eat a balanced diet; the ham is the solid part an' the whiskey's the liquid —that makes the balance, see? I ain't et no other breakfast fer years—an' I ain't never been sick a day in my life." Cush wolfed the last of the ham, washed it down with what remained of the whiskey, wiped his mustache on the bar rag, and set out a bottle and glasses. "Now we'll have a little drink," he said. "Nothin' like a good breakfast to start the day out right."

"Gawd," said Black John, eyeing the other with reverence, "you fergot to powder yer nose!"

"You know," said Cush, "I kind of mistrusted them two birds, Davis an' Lincoln —Williams an' Connor, as Downey calls 'em. I've kind of kep' my eye on 'em when they've been in here; Davis is so damn gabby, an' Lincoln so still an' sullen like. Seems as if they hate one another, too. I've ketched the looks each one gives the other when he ain't lookin'—as if he'd like to kill him."

"Well, either one could carry out his notion without painin' me none," observed Black John. "I've watched 'em, too, an' seems like each one fears the other as well as hates him. You kin bet they wouldn't neither one of 'em trust the other around the first bend of a crick."

"But they're pardners. They live together up on that claim."

"Yeah—that's because they won't neither one trust the other hardly out of his sight."

"They ain't no kind of men to have on a crick, specially after what Downey told us. We ort to figger some way of gittin' red of 'em. As long as they don't do nothin' in the way of a crime, we can't hang 'em. Couldn't we run 'em out of here? First thing we know, they'll be murderin' some of the boys."

BLACK JOHN shook his head judicially. "No, it wouldn't be ethical. Leastwise, not till I locate their caches. Downey claimed they got anywheres from twenty to fifty thousan' off'n that Dutchman. If anything was to happen to 'em, it would be a shame to leave all that dust to rot somewheres in the gravel."

"That's so," agreed Cush. "D'you think they've got more'n one cache?"

"Shore. Hatin' an' mistrustin' one another, like they do, they wouldn't depend on one cache. Each would think the other would rob it. I'm bettin' they've divided up the Dutchman's dust, an' each has cached his share."

"An' you think that much as they hate each other, neither one will knock the other one off till he locates his cache?"

Black John pondered the question as he casually refilled his glass. Noting the action, Cush made an entry in his day book, and refilled his own, as he waited for the reply.

"That was my idea of it, till Downey come along, an' told us about them wills."

"What's the wills got to do with it?" asked Cush.

"Prob'ly nothin' at all—if they're wills."

"What would they be?"

"Everything that's wrote ain't a will," reminded Black John.

"But if they ain't wills, why would they file 'em with the public administrator?" persisted Cush.

"That," replied Black John, "is what I'm tryin' to figger out. Guess I'll Siwash

it fer a few days out in the bresh. You kin give it out amongst the boys that I'm off on a moose hunt."

By a roundabout way through the hills, Black John approached the valley of Halfaday at a point where he could look from the rimrocks directly down upon the sparsely timbered bend upon which the two partners had pitched their tent. Arranging a comfortable place of concealment among the rocks, he produced a powerful pair of glasses and studied the two men who were working perfunctorily at a shaft topped by a crude windlass. He studied

the men and their camp, and, inch by inch, he studied the lay of the land until the position of each stick and stone was committed to memory.

In the matter of unending patience, and unrelaxing vigilance, Black John could out-Siwash any Siwash. For three days and three nights he hardly stirred from his post, doing without a fire, eating cold snacks, drinking from a convenient spring, catching forty winks now and again in his blanket.

LATE in the evening of the third day, he watched as the two men left the camp together and headed down the creek for Cush's. Half an hour later, he slipped on a pair of soft moccasins which would leave no telltale marks, and scrambled down from the rims into the valley. Proceeding without hesitation to a point in the rock-ledge, some two hundred yards from the tent, he drew a loose fragment from its place, and swiftly transferred numerous heavy little mooseskin sacks to his pack-sack. Replacing the fragment, he struck across the creek, and from a rotting heap of spruce tops, he drew out other heavy little sacks which also he added to his sack. Then, shouldering the heavy pack, he proceeded down the creek, secreted the pack-sack in his cabin, and walked over to the saloon, where he noted that the two partners from up the creek were deeply engrossed in a stud game with the four other patrons of the place. Strolling casually to the bar where Old Cush had already set out a bottle and two glasses, he poured himself a drink.

"Did you have any luck?" asked the sombre faced proprietor, as he filled his own glass.

"Yeah—some. When the game busts up me an' you'll take us a little walk."

"Where to?"

"Up the crick a piece, in the wake of them two hombres. I figger we'll see some fun. If it ain't closin' up time when they leave, you better speak to One Armed John about tendin' bar fer you while yer gone."

THE game broke up before daylight, and after a few drinks at the bar, the men known on Halfaday as Davis and Lincoln left the saloon and headed up the creek. The others also departed, leaving Black John and Cush alone in the saloon.

"Come on," said Black John. "Let's git goin'."

"I told One Armed John to open up in the mornin' in case I wasn't here," replied Cush, "an' to tend bar till I got back. Will we need grub an' blankets?"

"No, only our rifles. We'd ort to be back agin noon."

Locking the saloon, Cush followed Black John up the creek. In the first pearling of the eastern sky they caught a glimpse of the two partners as they neared their camp. The silent, sullen Lincoln stepped into the tent, while Davis, after a quick glance around, moved off swiftly in the direction

of the rockledge. Two minutes later Black John and Cush, from their nearby place of concealment, heard the sound of boots pounding the earth heavily. Lincoln evidently heard it, too, for the flap of the tent flew up, and he stepped out just as Davis, charging around the corner of the tent, tripped on a guyrope and crashed into him head foremost. Both were hurled to the ground, the voice of Davis rising shrill with rage: "Damn you, you robbed me! You know'd where my cache was. I aimed to move it. I seen you snoopin'—a week ago."

"You lie!" growled the deeper voice of Lincoln. "It's you that knows where my cache is. You've robbed it, an' moved the stuff out of yourn fer a blind."

"If the dust ain't in yer cache, it's because you moved it yerself, when you stole mine," shrilled Davis, beating at the other's face with his fists.

Lincoln, the heavier of the two, warded off the blows as best he could, and a moment later succeeded in rolling the other beneath him. With a swift movement he drew Davis's knife from its sheath, and held its point at its owner's upturned throat. The man's frantic struggles ceased, as from his lips broke, not the expected plea for mercy, but a burst of shrill, derisive laughter:

"Cut, damn you! Why don't you cut? You don't dare to! If anything happens to me the public administrator will open that paper—an' then where'll you be? If they don't hang you here on Halfaday fer murderin' me, the law'll hang you fer murderin' old man Schultz. That was a smart trick you thought up—writin' out them two confessions! You thought it up 'cause you was afraid I'd kill you—but it works both ways."

LINCOLN tossed the knife into the tent and got to his feet. "Have some sense," he growled. "If yer cache is robbed, maybe mine is, too. Let's go see."

"I don't need to go see—you dirty, double-crossin' skunk. Of course the stuff'll be gone out of yer cache! It's part of yer game!" His voice, quavering with rage, rang high and thin. Diving into the tent he returned with his knife which he brandished in the other's face as he danced about before him hurling vile invective.

Withdrawing a short distance down the creek, Black John and Cush stepped from the bush into the trail and halted as though in surprise at the scene.

"Hey there!" bellowed Black John. "What the hell's the ruckus? We don't want no knife fightin' on Halfaday!"

Both partners turned at the sound of the voice and stared at the newcomers, who were hurrying toward them up the trail. "He robbed my cache, damn him! I'll cut his heart out!"

"Like hell I did! It's him robbed mine," growled Lincoln. "An' if he don't come clean, I'll blow his damn liver out through the back of his neck!"

Black John halted and scowled from one to the other. "There won't be no heart cuttin' nor liver blowin' on Halfaday," he announced. "Nor yet, there won't be no cache robbin', neither. Each an' any one of the crimes you've mentioned constitutes a hangable offense. If you two values yer health to any extent, you'd better pipe down a bit. We keep this here crick moral as hell, on account we don't want the police nosin' around up here. Crime of any kind is give short shrift in miners' meetin'."

"I ain't done nothin'," growled Lincoln.

"He robbed my cache, an' he's tryin' to claim I robbed his'n!"

BLACK JOHN regarded the two sourly. "We'd ort to take you both back with us to Cush's an' call a miners' meetin' to set on the case," he said. "But with each one testifyin' agin' the other, such proceedin' would ondoubtless terminate in two hangin's. I don't favor hangin' a man if some other method would accomplish the same result, meanin' that

if I kind of conducted a inquiry, we might arrive at a more amicable agreement an' avoid callin' a meetin', which it couldn't hardly terminate no other way than fatal to you boys. But I don't want you both talkin' to onct—an' I don't want one listenin' to what the other's tellin', so he kin frame up his own lies to suit the case. I'm placin' you both under what you might say, technical arrest, an' app'intin' Cush to guard alias Lincoln there, whilst I take alias Davis down the crick a piece an' question him. After I'm through with him, I'll do similar with Lincoln, an' mebbe between the two of 'em I kin strike an average that'll be somewheres near the truth." He motioned to Davis. "Come on with me," he said, "there's a few things I want to ask you."

Lincoln spoke up. "While yer talkin' to him, can't I go an' look at my cache? I know damn well what I'll find—but I might as well make sure."

"Course he knows what——" Black John interrupted Davis with a roar:

"Shet up! You'll git a chanct to let that stuff drip off'n yer chin in a minute!" He turned to Cush. "You go with Lincoln, if he wants to look in his cache. But don't let him out of yer sight, an' if he tries any funny work, drill him. I'll holler when I want him."

A short distance down the creek Black John seated himself on an outcropping rock ledge, and motioned the other to do likewise.

"Now, Davis," he said, "when me an' Cush hove in sight a while back we seen you dancin' around in front of yer pardner makin' murderous passes with a knife an' threatenin' to cut his heart out. What was the cause of yer apparent ire, if any?"

"He robbed my cache—that's why."

"When?"

"Sometime in the last couple of days. I went to it day before yesterday, an' it was all right. Then this mornin' I went to it, an' it was empty."

"What makes you think it was him done it?"

"Who the hell else could? No one else know'd I had a cache. I've suspected fer a week that he snooped on me, an' found out where it was."

"How much was in it?"

"Right around a thousan' ounces."

"How much would be in Lincoln's cache?"

"Jest about the same."

"Where is his cache at?"

"It's in under—how the hell do I know?"

"This here dust that you boys had—was it what you stole off'n old man Schultz when you murdered him down on that feeder of Eldorado?"

INSTANTLY the man leaped to his feet. "What the hell—it's a lie! I never seen Eldorado. Who's old man Schultz? What the hell you talkin' about?" His face had gone dead white, and his eyes stared at the muzzle of the rifle that covered him as Black John's finger caressed the trigger.

The big man grinned. "Don't git excited," he said. "On Halfaday we don't never hold anything agin a man that he done before he come here. In fact, most of us is outlawed fer one thing er another. But we generally know a hell of a lot about a man by the time he gits here, jest the same. Like about you an' Lincoln, bein' know'd down Eldorado way as Williams an' Connor, an' about yer torturin' an' murderin' old man Schultz. All that ain't none of our business—but what you do after you git here is our business. It ain't no good fer you to deny that murder—them statements you an' Lincoln left with the public administrator proves it."

The man's eyes grew suddenly wide with horror. "What do you know about them statements? They was sealed. Good God—the police will be up here, an'——"

"Listen," interrupted Black John. "The police don't know nothin' about what's in them envelopes. They don't dast to open 'em. It ain't legal."

"How do you know about 'em, then?"

"Well—I ain't no police. It's a well know'd fact that steam will open envelopes. An' it's also a fact that there's things I'd do that the police dastn't. Nothin' that ain't strictly ethical, you onderstand—but I allow myself more latitude than the law allows the police."

"Wha—what you goin' to do about it?" gasped the man, sweat standing out on his forehead.

"About what?"

"Why—about—Schultz?"

"Nothin'. I jest told you that what a man done before he come to Halfaday ain't none of our business. But we don't stand fer no cache robbin' or other crime on Halfaday. If yer pardner's guilty we'll hang him fer the robbery."

"No, no! Don't hang him! You can't prove it. I won't testify agin' him."

Once again Black John grinned. "One minute yer hatin' him, threatening to cut his heart out—an' the next yer beggin' me not to hang him. An' I don't blame you. Fer all your knife play you wouldn't never have harmed him—you wouldn't dare to, not with that paper he wrote out in the hands of the public administrator. The administrator thinks it's a will, an' as soon

as he found out Lincoln was dead, he'd open it—an' learn all about Schultz. Such statement couldn't hurt Lincoln none, bein' as he would be dead, anyhow. It was a slick trick fer each of you to keep the other from murderin' him."

The man moistened his lips with his tongue. "If you hang him, the law'll hang me," he jittered. "What the hell we goin' to do?"

"Well," replied Black John, "the facts is, I don't much like this here Lincoln. He don't look like a man you could trust."

"I'll say you can't!"

"I was jest thinkin', that if you was to give me a note to the public administrator askin' him to hand over Lincoln's will—like as if he'd made a later one, er he wanted to change it, er somethin'—then I'd git it, an' fetch it up here to you, an' there wouldn't be no evidence agin you. I happen to be goin' down to Dawson in a couple of days. It wouldn't be no trouble."

The man's eyes lighted with sudden eagerness that almost instantly died out. "But hell!" he said. "The administrator wouldn't hand over Connor's will on my say-so. He wouldn't have no right to."

Black John's grin widened. "S'pose," he suggested, "that you was to sign Lincoln's, er rather Conner's name, to the note. He ain't seen neither one of yer writin', has he?"

"Why—no! We give him the envelopes blank, an' he wrote our names on 'em hisself. By God, that's an idee! I'll do it. You got a pencil? Onct I git that paper, an' I'll——" He halted abruptly, with a swift glance at Black John, who seemed to be paying no attention—"I'll be safe," he added lamely.

"How's that?"

"I said, sure, I'll write out that note. You got a pencil?"

A few minutes later Black John pocketed the note, and closed the interview with an admonition: "Don't tell Lincoln a damn thing—not that I know about the Schultz matter, nor nothin'. Then in a couple of weeks you come down to Cush's—an' I'll slip you the envelope I git from the administrator."

Black John's interview with Lincoln was almost word for word, a duplicate of his interview with Davis. And with both notes in his pocket and a promise of secrecy from each, he and Cush took their departure from the camp.

"So long, boys," he exclaimed. "Re-

member what I told you, an' you'll undoubtless save yerselves a hangin'—no crime of no kind on Halfaday. An' remember I've got yer promise."

BACK in the saloon, the two cronies stood facing each other across the bar, as Old Cush set out the bottles and glasses. "What," he asked, "was you talkin' so damn long to them fellas about?"

"Oh—jest this an' that," replied Black John. "I was explainin' to 'em about not committin' no crimes on the crick."

"Do you know who done the cache robbin'?"

"Yeah—I got a general idee."

"Which one of 'em was it? They're both sech damn liars, a man wouldn't believe neither one of 'em. But I went with Lincoln to his cache, an' when he seen it was empty, he shore said plenty. I don't believe he emptied it hisself. If he did, he's a damn good actor."

"It wasn't him."

"It was Davis, eh? I mistrusted it was him—he talks so damn much. You know I told you onct, John, that I wouldn't trust a man that runs off at the head like he does."

"No—it wasn't Davis."

"Well—who did rob them caches, then?"

Black John downed his liquor and refilled his glass. "They wasn't robbed," he announced solemnly. "That is, not under a strict construction of the term. The removal of the dust from 'em was accomplished by me, before you an' me went up the crick. It ain't ethical that anyone should profit off'n such an ornery, low-down murder as what they done. I deemed it inadvisable to allow the proceeds of such crime to remain in the possession of them damn crooks, so I packed the dust down with me. It's in my cabin now. I'll fetch your share over in a little while. I ain't weighed it yet, but it ort to run right around a thousan' ounces apiece. Criminals like that should be taught a lesson. An' besides, I don't think they'll ever be needin' it. They don't look to me like men that would live long."

"But hell, John—we can't hang 'em on Halfaday, fer that Schultz murder! An' it wouldn't be right to hang 'em fer robbin' each other, when they never done it."

"Who said anything about hangin' 'em? Cripes, plenty of folks dies that ain't hung. You know damn well I wouldn't do nothin' that ain't strictly ethical. I'll go fetch over yer dust, an' then I've got to hit fer Dawson."

"You mean, yer goin' to tip 'em off to the police? That you've run onto some evidence fer Downey?"

"Hell—no! I wouldn't do nothin' like that. Let Downey git his own evidence—like I have to. No sir—I b'lieve in lettin' damn cusses like them two work out their own salvation. So long. I'm makin' a quick trip. I'll be seein' you."

ONE evening, two weeks later, Black John entered the doorway of Cush's saloon. A stud game was in progress, and he noted that two of the players were Lincoln and Davis. Crossing the room, he took his accustomed place at the end of the bar, and proceeded to shake dice with old Cush.

Presently Davis rose from the table and stepped out the back door. Returning a few minutes later, he paused at the bar for a drink, taking care to pass close to Black John, who slipped him an envelope across the face of which was written Connor's name. Davis returned to the game, and a half hour later Lincoln cashed in his chips and loafed over to the bar where he mingled with several men who were discussing the affairs of the creek over their liquor. Watching his chance, Black John slipped him an envelope upon which the name of Williams appeared in the bold hand of the public administrator. Shortly thereafter Black John went to his cabin and turned in. He had made a quick trip to Dawson.

It was afternoon of the following day before he appeared at Cush's. "Let's take a little siyou up the crick," he said, after he and Cush had absorbed a couple of drinks.

"What fer?"

"Oh, jest to kind of see what's goin' on. Thought we'd stroll up as fer as Lincoln an' Davis's camp, an' then turn around an' come back, mebbe."

"I don't see no sense in that," objected Cush. "I went up there with you onct before, an' we didn't accomplish nothin' but hearin' them two damn cusses bevilin' one another."

Black John grinned. "A man can't never tell what he accomplishes on them little trips till he goes back an' sees. Come on—let's git goin'."

Reluctantly, Old Cush beckoned to One Armed John to take his place behind the bar, and pausing only to secure his rifle, he followed Black John out the door. "I don't see no sense in trottin' back an' forth all the time. Why don't we run them damn cusses off'n the crick an' be done with 'em?"

"We can't do it," said Black John. "It wouldn't be ethical. As long as they behave theirselves, they've got as much right on the crick as what we have."

NO ONE was in sight as the two approached the claim that had been staked by the two partners. The idle windlass spanned the shallow shaft beside the small dump of lean gravel. Within the tent was an ominous silence.

"Must be they've gone huntin'," opined Cush.

"Mebbe," replied Black John. "But somehow I've got my doubts."

Striding to the tent he threw back the flap, and Old Cush gasped audibly at the sight of the two bodies that lay locked in the grip of death. On the floor lay a naked sheath knife, its blade dulled by a coating of brownish red blood. Gripped tightly in a dead hand was another knife, its blade buried to the hilt in Lincoln's chest just above the heart.

"You claimed they wouldn't live long," exclaimed Cush, glancing into Black John's face. "How in hell did you know?"

"I didn't," replied the big man. "But a man's got a right to guess, ain't he? I told you them two had to work out their own salvation—an' it looks like they've done so. Anyways, they died happy."

"Happy!" cried Cush. "How in hell could a man die happy if he was all slashed to hell, like Davis, or had a knife run through his gizzard like Lincoln there?"

"They killed one another, didn't they? Hatin' an' fearin' each other like they done, it would of made either one of 'em happy to be killin' the other."

"What'll we do with 'em?" asked Cush.

"Well, we might try buryin' 'em," suggested Black John. "I've heard that recommended in similar cases. But first we'd ort to hold some kind of an inquest, so their deaths kin be duly reported. Corporal Downey'd like to know, so he won't waste no more time tryin' to dig up evidence agin' 'em. You're a coroner, Cush. How many does it take to hold an inquest?"

"W-e-e-l, I ain't jest shore," replied Cush, tugging at an end of his long yellow mustache. "But it looks like we'd ort to have at least one besides me."

"I ain't very busy, right now. I kin serve. Swear me in, an' we'll git it over with. Here—I've got a pencil an' paper, I'll set down the findin's of the inquest, an' you kin sign it." He wrote rapidly for a few moments and, clearing his throat, read the result of his labor to Cush:

"Halfaday Crick, Y. T.
s.s."

"What's s.s. mean?" asked Cush.

"Short shrift," replied Black John. "It's put on all legal documents. Don't go interruptin' no more till I git through:

"Know all men by these presents that the

aforesaid an' to wit; alias Jefferson Lincoln alias Connor; and alias Abraham Davis alias Williams was found dead in their tent, same bein' situate an' located on a bend of Halfaday Crick about three miles, more or less, above Cushing's Fort on said crick. A dooly app'inted coroner's inquest was held, an' deceasts was both of 'em found to have come to their deaths by bein' stabbed, cut, slashed, sliced, stuck, gashed, an' otherwise mutilated by each other an' vicy versy, in what appeared to have be'n a quarrel or a misonderstandin' of some sort, a couple of knives know'd to be the property of the deceasts, havin' be'n found in such suspicious circumstances as would p'int to such verdick. The corpses was buried, an' diligent search unearthed the followin' property which the aforementioned corpses died seized of, to wit; 2 sheath knives (good), camp dishes etc. (partly bunged up), 4 blankets (needs washin'), 2 rifles (fair), 1 tent (fair) 2 pack sacks (1 pretty fair, 1 tore), some clothes (prob'ly needs b'ilin'). Same not bein' deemed of sufficient value to bother the public administrator with, was divided up amongst the coroner's jury, by order of the coroner.

Signed, Lyme Cushing, coroner.
Halfaday Crick, Y. T.

"An' now," continued Black John, "we'll git along with the buryin'. We'll dump 'em in the shaft, an' shovel the gravel back. It'll save diggin'."

As the bodies were rolled over, preparatory to dragging them to the mouth of the shaft, a sealed white envelope was found tightly clutched in the hand of each.

"What's them?" asked Old Cush, staring at the envelopes.

"Oh—them. Why, them's the envelopes Downey told us about these two leavin' with the public administrator. I mistrusted there might be trouble brewin' when they asked me to fetch 'em up from Dawson—but I didn't hardly like to refuse." Stooping, he removed the envelopes from the clenched hands, and slit them with his knife. "We'll send these down to Downey along with the report," he said. "It's that evidence he was wantin'. He kin read 'em now. They ain't sealed no more—so the law can't claim it ain't ethical."

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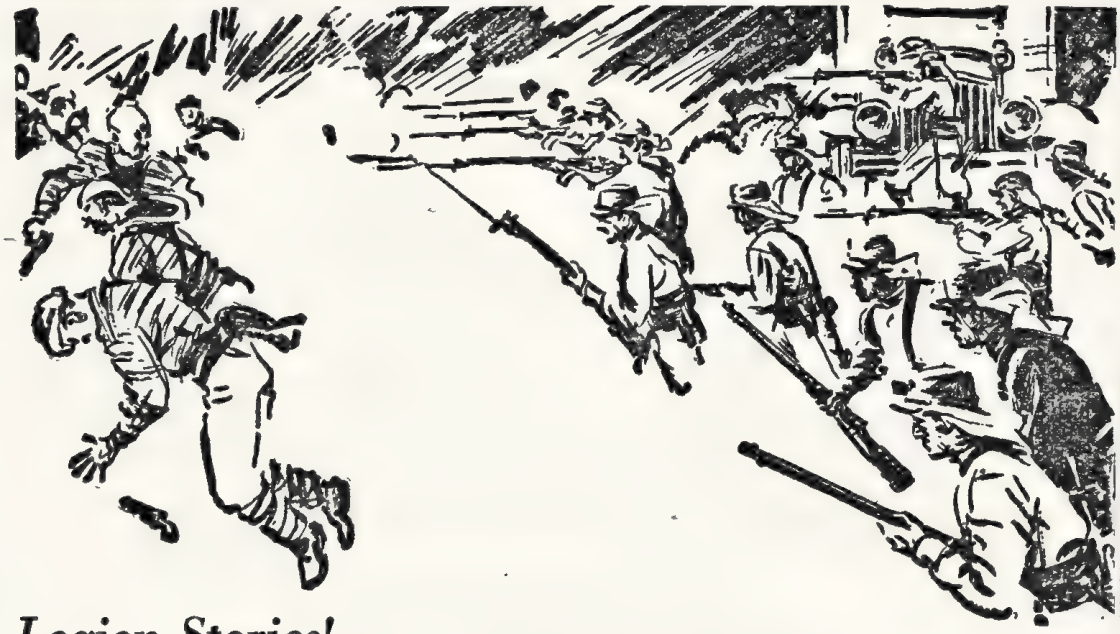

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